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President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Agenda item 49

Culture of peace

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/62/97 and A/62/337)

The President: The General Assembly will now begin the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, under agenda item 49, entitled "Culture of peace", and in accordance with resolution 61/269, of 25 May 2007.

As members are aware, the High-level Dialogue will discuss the overall theme of interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity.

I welcome all participants to the first High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. By convening this event, the General Assembly has taken an important stand. We are reaffirming the values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But, more important, we are taking concrete steps to promote those values around the world.

During the general debate, heads of State and Government from all regions placed great emphasis on the value of tolerance and mutual understanding. That demonstrates the commitment of the international community to promote those values. I would like in particular to acknowledge the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines for spearheading this initiative, which complements and builds upon other initiatives undertaken by the United Nations, including the Alliance of Civilizations.

We live in unprecedented times. Cultures and religions are being pulled ever closer together by a web of telecommunication and economic links. While contributing to the richness of our human experience, those encounters also reveal deep-rooted misunderstandings. However, in this era of globalization we have the unrivalled opportunity and responsibility to replace intolerance and discrimination with understanding and mutual acceptance.

Open and sustained dialogue, respect for freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to that endeavour. The United Nations has a crucial role in promoting such a dialogue and advancing the fundamental freedom that we must all respect others' religions and beliefs. In doing so, we should also recognize that a crime committed in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion, and that religion should not be used as a pretext for war.

In that regard, several recommendations emerged from the General Assembly's thematic debate on the

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subject of civilizations and the challenge for peace, which was held earlier this year. Those recommendations stated: that we must acknowledge the legitimate rights of others to assert their identity, if we want to have meaningful dialogue; that religious leaders have a duty, drawing on the principles of their own faiths, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance in their communities; and that there are already many helpful tools available to promote positive encounters among people of different cultures. To that end, we should all become instruments of peace. We must begin a global dialogue using public campaigns and all forms of media to spread greater awareness of the issues.

Governments can play an additional role by adopting educational curricula that instil values of peace and tolerance. Children are not born with prejudice; it is learned. It is our common challenge to eliminate, together, all distorted notions that deepen barriers and widen divides, for they all originate in the discriminatory practices of the mind.

We can achieve this through a multifaceted dialogue that promotes unity in diversity and replaces misunderstanding with mutual understanding and acceptance. The success of this global dialogue also rests on the active involvement of the media, the private sector, civil society, faith groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their insight and outreach will be instrumental in helping to achieve our goal. That is why I am delighted that later this afternoon the General Assembly will hold an interactive hearing with those important stakeholders. All Member States are invited to participate.

Next year we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many people still feel that their rights are not respected. In some regions, many people feel that their dignity has been violated and that internationally agreed principles and values are not equally applied to all. These issues cut to the core of the perceived lack of justice and the political instability in the world today.

To make peace some people believe that you need to forget. From my own experience, I would suggest that reconciliation is a fair compromise between remembering and forgetting. The only means to achieve this is through intensive dialogue at both the political and the cultural and social levels. Promoting human dignity and equal access to rights and opportunities constitutes the cornerstone of this conversation. Here, I would like to quote the great Dante Alighieri:

> "The greatest gift that God in his bounty created, and the most consonant with his goodness, and that which he prizes the most, was free will, with which all intelligent creatures, and they alone, were and are endowed."

In going forward then, let us each respect the uniqueness of each other's perspective so that together we can honour the rich diversity of humanity.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon.

The Secretary-General: I am honoured to be here for this Dialogue. In the nine months that I have been in office, I have travelled to all corners of the united nations, from Kinshasa to Kabul, from Brussels to Beirut. Everywhere I have visited, and among all the different people I have met, I have encountered one common sentiment: a universal longing for peace and an aspiration to prosperity.

But all too often I have discovered that people who aspire to the same things also suffer from the same prejudices. They all fear that which is different from them: the other ethnicity, the other skin colour, the other cultural or linguistic tradition and, above all, the other religion.

And yet, in today's era of global travel and instant satellite transmissions, people everywhere are encountering less of the familiar and more of the other. This reality has fed rising intercultural and interreligious tensions, as well as growing alienation among vast segments of the world population.

Today, there is an urgent need to address this worrying trend. We need to rebuild bridges and engage in a sustained and constructive intercultural dialogue, one that stresses shared values and shared aspirations. It is time to promote the idea that diversity is a virtue, not a threat; it is time to explain that different religions, belief systems and cultural backgrounds are essential to the richness of the human experience; and it is time to stress that our common humanity is greater — far greater — than our outward differences.

In short, it is time — indeed, it is past time — for a constructive and committed dialogue: a dialogue among individuals, among communities and between

nations. The General Assembly is a unique forum for such an exchange. Indeed, by bringing together representatives of all countries under one roof, the Assembly provides a universal platform to reach out to different nations and cultures.

Today's gathering also comes at a particularly auspicious time, as Jews mark the celebration of the Torah and Muslims approach the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Such occasions remind us that men and women of faith around the world can be brought together, rather than separated, by their convictions and their belief in something greater than themselves.

Last week, there was also a ministerial meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations initiative to help build bridges and promote dialogue between cultures and religions. I was delighted to see how membership of the Alliance of Civilizations had nearly doubled since the inaugural meeting a year ago. That reflects the valuable work being performed by the Alliance under the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio. But it also represents a growing resolve among nations to work together to heal divides in our world.

I draw strength from that resolve at a time when so many of the challenges we face are aggravated by distrust and hostility. I also draw strength from gatherings such as this one. Looking around this Hall today, I feel that we are all united: we are united in our choice of dialogue before confrontation; united in our pursuit of engagement before alienation; united in our embrace of harmony and understanding.

In that spirit, I wish all participants a most productive meeting and look forward to the outcome of their discussions.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

Before proceeding further I would now like to draw attention to a number of organizational matters pertaining to the conduct of the meeting.

We turn first to the length of statements. In order to accommodate all the speakers on the list, I urge speakers to adhere to the seven-minute time limit for their statements, on the understanding that that does not preclude the distribution of more extensive written texts. I earnestly appeal to speakers to cooperate in this respect, so that all speakers can speak today and tomorrow.

In order to assist speakers in managing their time, a light system has been installed at the rostrum, which functions as follows: a green light will be activated at the start of a speaker's statement; an orange light will be activated 30 seconds before the end of the seven minutes; and a red light will be activated when the seven-minute limit has elapsed.

Before giving the floor to the first speaker, I would like to note that I have been informed by the delegation of Israel that, due to the Jewish holidays of Shmini Atzeret/Simhat Torah and the last days of Sukkot, which are being celebrated on 4 and 5 October, Israel regrets its inability to participate in the High-Level Dialogue and looks forward to joining future interreligious and intercultural events.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Manuel de Castro, Vice-President of the Republic of the Philippines.

Mr. De Castro (Philippines): It is a great honour for me to represent my country at the High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. As this is the first time that I address the General Assembly, allow me, Mr. President, to convey to you my warmest congratulations on your well-deserved election. May I also convey my congratulations to the Secretary-General in his maiden year at the helm of the United Nations system.

The promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation has become a cornerstone of Philippine policy for peace and development. It is not a new concept for us, given that our history has been largely shaped by cultural and religious diversity. Thus, the highest law of our land — the Philippine constitution — mandates the promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of all Filipinos, in particular those of religious minorities and indigenous communities.

As early as the 1960s, religious and grass-roots organizations and other civil society groups — particularly in Muslim Mindanao, in the southern Philippines — had already been engaged in the practice of interreligious and intercultural dialogue as an effective tool for peace. The national Government therefore saw fit to enact laws and adopt measures to strengthen and enhance the engagement of civil society in promoting economic and human development and the peace process.

The 2004-2010 medium-term Philippine development plan, which is the framework for governance of the present Administration, values interfaith dialogue, education and advocacy as effective tools for the conduct of healing and reconciliation programmes in conflict-affected communities. The 2006-2010 Philippine plan of action on interfaith dialogue and cooperation strengthens Government and civil society partnership and capacities in promoting interfaith dialogue and solidarity, in particular in the areas of education and training, media advocacy, peace processes, poverty reduction, the promotion of human rights, environmental protection, the empowerment of women and anti-corruption efforts.

In June of this year, our President created the National Committee on Interfaith Cooperation to strengthen the implementation of our Government's interfaith policy. Basic madrasa education has now been institutionalized in all public elementary schools that have Muslim students. Moreover, a number of our universities are developing and incorporating peace studies into their school curricula. Our Congress has also passed the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, which is recognized to be among the world's strongest State-promulgated laws that respect and protect the fundamental freedoms and ways of life of indigenous peoples. Key development policies are thus in place in the Philippines to provide an environment conducive to the development of a vibrant culture of peaceful interfaith communities, which has made it possible for civil society groups to participate in development efforts at the national, local and community levels.

The Philippine experience has demonstrated the significance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue in preventing conflicts and healing social wounds in conflict-stricken communities such as those in the southern Philippines. Interfaith dialogue has been found to be essential in translating shared values of peace and respect into practical action at the grass-roots level. It offers a way out of the vicious circle of mistrust and conflict among religious and ethnic groups, for two reasons.

First, it provides a venue for building trust and respect based on appreciation and acceptance of the common values and differences among religions, cultures and ethnicities. Secondly, it provides an opportunity to establish a common understanding of the causes of armed conflicts affecting multi-ethnic and multicultural communities such as those in the southern Philippines. That approach complements our Government's efforts in resolving conflicts through its comprehensive peace process, in which religious leaders and workers and various faith-based and interfaith organizations are involved in peace negotiations, the monitoring of ceasefire agreements and advocating for human rights and international humanitarian law.

Our very own Bishops-Ulama Conference, which is recognized as the first of its kind in the world, continues to be a partner of Government in pursuing the national peace agenda. That organization and many other interfaith groups form part of the civil society network whose strength and support significantly define the outcome of the peace process. Along with the business community, those groups are converging in building a dedicated peace constituency, in particular by carving out zones of peace that bar armed conflict within delineated territories.

Inspired by our achievements in promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation at home, in 2004 the Philippines introduced an unprecedented General Assembly draft resolution on the promotion of interreligious cooperation for peace. Adopted as resolution 59/23, it inspired the convening of the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which led to the holding of the 2005 summit, which was chaired by our President and which adopted the Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace.

As an offshoot of the Conference, in March 2006 the Philippines launched the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which is a platform for collaboration supportive of the peace and development goals of the United Nations. The Tripartite Forum has much to offer. I invite all Governments that have not yet done so to join us in the Tripartite Forum.

The Philippines has also been active in promoting interfaith dialogue at the regional level — promoting interfaith dialogue at the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, the Asia-Europe Meeting, the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Forum — all of which have espoused that concept. Last year, the Philippines hosted the Cebu Dialogue on Regional Interfaith

Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity.

This year, the Philippines co-sponsored the third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, which was held in New Zealand, where over 150 participants from Asian and Pacific nations resolved to build bridges among faith communities and Governments to learn from each other's experiences and promote peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

Last June, the Philippines co-sponsored the third Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue, which was held in Nanjing, China, where 160 participating countries vowed to deepen both government and civil society participation in the promotion and observance of interfaith dialogue for peace and development. The fourteenth summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana in 2006 endorsed the offer of the Philippines to host a NAM special meeting on interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace in the Philippines in 2009, which will include the participation of non-governmental organizations and the religious sector.

Indeed, the present global, regional and national peace and security situation highlights the need for deliberate, strategic and coordinated efforts in interfaith dialogue and cooperation through strengthened partnership between governments, the United Nations system and civil society. In that regard, my delegation proposes the following ways forward. First, United Nations Member States would institutionalize interfaith and interreligious initiatives through policy and appropriate implementing mechanisms; in that regard, the Philippines puts forward as a model the Philippine national committee on interfaith cooperation. Secondly, Member States would uphold freedom of religion and strengthen their respective mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights. Thirdly, Member States would adopt a common plan of action and declare an international year of dialogue among religions and cultures. Fourthly, Member States would adopt policies and programmes to promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples and would implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Fifthly, Member States would encourage interfaith centres in schools of higher learning. Sixthly, the United Nations would strengthen the newly established focal unit on interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational matters to ensure that global, regional and national efforts towards promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace are monitored, reported, sustained and supported.

The Philippines has played and will continue to play an active role in the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace, development and the protection of human dignity. We are committed to the urgent task of deepening cooperation and understanding between cultures, religions and civilizations to eliminate racial tensions, myths and prejudices that exacerbate conflicts and to effectively deal with global problems and issues.

I would like to close with an appeal to everyone present here today. Let us commit ourselves to work for United Nations system-wide interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation as an important means to pursue, build and sustain a culture of peace and let us remain aware of the positive contributions of faith communities in the discharge of the respective mandates of the United Nations.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Munir Akram, chairman of the delegation of Pakistan.

Mr. Akram (Pakistan): This is a moment of immense pleasure for me to be able to participate in the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. The event is being organized as a follow-up to General Assembly resolution 61/221, which was jointly sponsored by Pakistan and the Philippines. It is also the first high-level dialogue on the important issue of interfaith cooperation that has emerged as one of the greatest issues which faces the international community.

The history of the last two millenniums proves that all the major monotheistic religions of the world — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — share a common heritage and converge on a multiplicity of universal values. The basic tenets of all religions and cultures are fundamentally similar: prescribing indivisible peace, dignity, honesty, equality, harmony, tolerance, cooperation, commitment, patience and fortitude. Throughout history, confrontation between faiths and civilizations, when it has occurred, was motivated by competing political or economic interests rather than incompatibility between the fundamental precepts of any religion.

Today also, the manifestations of misunderstanding and friction between cultures and civilizations are not the result of religious differences. They arise from divergent political perspectives on certain important issues such as the crises in the Middle East.

The post-9/11 world has accentuated that polarization amongst communities belonging to different faiths and religions. There are perceptions in the West about Islam, which is portrayed by some as a faith propagating terrorism and extremism and bent upon striking at the values of the Western world. The image of Islam is further distorted by the role of some religious and political extremists on both sides.

In the Muslim world, there is a general belief that the West is deliberately suppressing or allowing the suppression of Muslim peoples in Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir and elsewhere. And it is felt at the popular level that freedom of expression is exploited as a weapon for the propagation and projection of insults and hate against Islam and its sacred symbols and personalities.

Islam is not a threat to Western civilization. It is a religion of peace and submission. There have been numerous instances throughout history where Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together peacefully as citizens in one State. Today Muslims should also be able to live in fraternity and freedom in Western countries. As the British historian Karen Armstrong has stated, if we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another.

It is Pakistan's hope that the Alliance of Civilizations launched under the auspices of the United Nations, can provide the organizational framework for the adoption of a comprehensive strategy for action at the international and national levels to promote understanding and cooperation between religions and cultures. Such a strategy should be inclusive involving Governments, civil society, religious leaders, the private sector, media and international organizations.

At the national level, each country should promote conscious action to counter extremism within its society. We must prohibit extremist organizations and hate literature, prevent the misuse of places of worship for the promotion of extremist views, prohibit the defamation and denigration of religions and religious personalities under the pretext of freedom of expression, adopt appropriate reforms in educational curricula to promote the correct interpretation of various faiths and cultures, initiate dialogue among our own people to build further understanding of the true spirit and values of their own faith as well as the major religions and adopt conscious policies for the protection of religious minorities.

At the international level, a series of actions are required, such as sincere efforts to resolve major international disputes, especially where these involve friction between different religions and faiths; the promotion of equitable socio-economic development and an end to the exploitation of the natural resources of developing countries; and the promotion of universal and multicultural education, inculcating greater understanding of other religions and cultures. To this end, one specific step we could take is the establishment of a common school for the training of officials and diplomats from nations representing different faiths. Additionally, we could encourage greater intercivilizational and interreligious exchanges and communication among Member States, including through the proper use of the Internet and other modern information technologies. Finally, in certain societies where migration has created a sudden mixture of faiths and cultures, we could launch conscious processes for gradual and peaceful integration, coexistence and cooperation. A start could be made in this direction with adoption of confidence-building measures that can overcome the hate and negative stereotypes that have sometimes been allowed to arise.

It is not surprising that there are differences within and between societies, cultures, civilizations and religions. These differences and diversity should not be the cause of confrontation. On the contrary, as the Holy Quran says, "this ethnic diversity is only for the sake of identity".

Each one of us is a member of the same human family, with the same hopes and aspirations for a happy and positive life. Each human being must have the right and the opportunity to realize these hopes and aspirations in accordance with his or her own values and beliefs, without coercion or intervention. For, as the Holy Quran also says, and we in Islam believe, "a man's faith is only between himself and God Almighty".

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Fiorenzo Stolfi, Head of Government and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of San Marino.

Mr. Fiorenzo Stolfi (San Marino) (*spoke in Italian; English text provided by the delegation*): Let me start by expressing my most sincere appreciation for this high-level meeting, which, together with the initiatives of numerous United Nations agencies on the topic of cultural diversity and projects, such as the Alliance of Civilizations, highlight the urgent need to promote, within our societies, the strengthening of dialogue among cultures and religions and therefore, the need for a commitment on the part of competent institutions and civil society to that dialogue.

This commitment to the strengthening of dialogue is, indeed, the sine qua non required for overcoming division and mistrust and for building confidence and strengthening cooperation within States and among peoples, which will, in turn, lead to the achieving of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

The Republic of San Marino, which maintained the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as the main priority of the programme during its six-month chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, ending last May, organized a conference on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, with the representation of diplomatic and religious representatives, researchers, and representatives of associations and the media from all over Europe. On this occasion, the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General underlined the current and urgent need to rebuild bridges and to be involved in a constant and constructive intercultural dialogue that promotes common values and shared aspirations.

Indeed, the role that people of faith can play seems to be fundamental in that they represent the underlying belief and ideal which belong to all great religious traditions: compassion, solidarity, respect for life and love for others, while calling on their believers to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated.

Additionally, on this occasion, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was also presented. This document will be published by the Council of Europe in 2008 — the very year the European Union has dedicated to intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the Council of Europe entrusted San Marino with the coordination of the first annual meeting dedicated to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue to be held, on an experimental basis, in spring 2008 and with the participation of the representatives of the 47 member States, as well as representatives of religions and civil societies.

On the basis of this experience, my country deems it clearly useful for international organizations, in addition to States, to multiply these occasions of meeting and dialogue, which, first of all, strengthen their mutual cooperation to face the challenges and new opportunities of cultural and religious diversity, and, secondly, provide them with new ideas, while lending momentum to the activities to be carried out by each of them.

However, dialogue cannot be separated from respect. Cultures and religions, both in terms of their expressions and mutual relationships, must respect those common values representing the very foundations of coexistence within the international community and cooperation among peoples. That is, respect for human rights — which are universal, unalienable and indivisible — democratic rule, the rule of law and the principle of justice.

Therefore, I share the assessments, concerns and aspirations of the representatives of the countries and Governments present here today. I note the complexity of the issues that increasingly characterizes our national realities, involved as we all are in the process of globalization, and leads to claims and problems that often call for novel and urgent answers. We believe dialogue can decisively help us overcome fears, the rejection of others and the emergence of cultural or religious discrimination, radicalism and violence. It can help us respect the integrity of the individual and, therefore, their practice of a faith or set of cultural values; a practice which, of course, must be a conscious and free choice.

Indeed, through dialogue, we can effectively strengthen our civil and social contracts by promoting the message of peace and dignity shared by various religious identities while rejecting, at the same time, distorted uses of religion.

At the national level, the participation and periodic campaigns of specific issues promoted by international organizations, as well as the attention paid to particular themes, such as those promoted by the United Nations, can serve as the engine for an

activity that originates in our national reality and can then spread in a incisive manner, involving different groups, in particular youth, who remain the main target of our action.

In conclusion, I would like to share a good wish with all participants of this meeting. A small cave has been carved into the stone of Mount Titano, where the small and millenary Republic of San Marino is situated. This space is devoted to meditation and prayer and open to all, regardless of their ideological or religious beliefs. It provides a haven for meditation and peace, which have for centuries been the fundamental values of my country and the priority goal of its participation in international affairs.

However, even this small, rocky cave reflects the light of the immense, universal message emanating from this Assembly, from which I take inspiration to wholeheartedly express the wish that, with the support of international cooperation and moments of significance such as this, the international community can overcome the barrier of hostility in hearts and minds and allow space for open-mindedness, meeting and dialogue where the constructive purposes characterizing all our peoples can be pooled together to build a future of peace for all of humanity.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Vartan Oskanian, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Armenia.

Mr. Oskanian (Armenia): An ancient people, serving as the perennial buffer between empires on the most trampled path on earth, Armenians have become living witnesses to the benefits of dialogue between and within cultures. We have been engaged in that international exchange for a very long time. Today, we in Armenia are among the greatest promoters of dialogue, especially in our immediate region.

Our geography has compelled us to seek bridges with peoples and cultures different from our own. If we have an independent State today, it is because we succeeded in perpetuating our identity even as we interacted and exchanged with societies around us.

It is because of our experience that we feel compelled to continually search for non-traditional ways to approach the overarching issue of our time: living at peace in a pluralist society. Not only have we lived in a pluralist society, we have, because of genocide and dispersion, had to set up homes and shops in nearly every country on Earth. This began when Armenian genocide survivors were welcomed and happily integrated into the fabric of the Arab Middle East. Religious differences did not preclude inclusion. Our diaspora, living as it did across borders, became both the means and the beneficiary of international exchange and dialogue.

We are living witnesses then to the fact that religious and linguistic differences need not translate to enmity and exclusion. It is intolerance, from its simplest form to its most complex, and the consequent rejection of individuals' human dignity, that causes ruptures in and between societies. To build a peace atop pain and destruction, it is clear that solutions can only be found through the genuine and universal acceptance and application of basic and fundamental human rights, both individual and collective.

Those rights include the right to determine one's destiny, to live free of security and oppression. The struggle of our brothers and sisters in Nagorno Karabagh is exactly that: a struggle for the most basic human right — the right to live free. It is not a struggle against anyone's religion or culture. The effort to seek support against their struggle by relying on ethnic and religious solidarity belies the universality of their claim, that people everywhere, whether Armenians from Nagorno Karabagh or Palestinians or the people of Darfur, all deserve to live in freedom and dignity.

As societies which have experienced pain and suffering at the hands of oppressors, we must teach and rely on the moral, ethical, social and political benefits of tolerance and cooperation. We must not feed the fears of otherness and exclusion. The frustrations, resentments and hostilities of victims of xenophobia and racism should not be underestimated or dismissed. The security implications of pent-up anger, daily humiliation and hopelessness cannot be exaggerated. We must all be concerned by them for reasons of principle as well as enlightened self-interest.

Our objective is a country and a world where the rights of individuals and groups are respected, where each neighbourhood and community, each city and country and each region and continent are safe havens for all who live or travel there. Religion is used to tear people apart, as are economic disparities, language and ideology. But the frustrating and fascinating contradiction is that faith and humanity also bind people together.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, The Honourable Adviser for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh.

Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh): Mr. President, may I begin by applauding your stewardship of the General Assembly and your leadership regarding the topic we are dealing with today. I also applaud the enthusiasm of the Secretary-General in this respect and his stimulating introductory remarks. I congratulate Pakistan and the Philippines for their initiative, to which Bangladesh accords unswerving support.

The present age of globalization poses a myriad of challenges. At the same time it opens up opportunities for the promotion of cultural diversity. Interactions among States and other actors have substantially increased over the past decade. They have also enhanced the scope for cooperation, complementarities and fulfilment of mutual interests. They have increased the potential for both cohesion and clash. Sadly, mistrust, suspicion, prejudice and misperception of the "other" continue to persist. Various new manifestations of intolerance towards vulnerable groups, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, refugees and migrant workers are on the rise.

We have witnessed the proliferation of extremism and racism. Millions have been rendered victims of religious and ethnic profiling or cultural intolerance. This situation has further been exploited by certain groups in order to widen the gap between various religions and faiths. Religious and cultural intolerance and disrespect are based on a false notion of supremacy of one religion or culture over others. This attitude fosters hatred, mistrust and exclusion. Eventually it leads to social, economic and political disparities and polarization in society.

We are convinced that people can overcome hatred through proper education that inculcates a culture of peace. Education is also essential for spreading better understanding and harmony. The State has a responsibility for removing hatred and intolerance and for protecting the citizens from discrimination. Building institutions, enacting appropriate laws and cultivating mutual respect can help establish a society of religious and communal harmony. The civil society along with the Government can and indeed must play a very crucial role towards this end. The media can also make a significant contribution towards raising awareness against such discrimination and intolerance and can bring to the fore the fact that humanity transcends all.

Peace is not simply the absence of war. Neither is it only the absence of violence and insecurity. Sustained peace is accompanied and must be accompanied by progress and development, by which we mean poverty eradication, rule of law, adherence to democratic principles and pluralism, dissemination of proper education, empowerment of women and the like.

Bangladesh believes in this context that international cooperation is a precondition for the pursuit of global peace, security and development. We stress that such international cooperation must be based on social inclusion, equality and equity, human dignity and justice. It is, therefore, necessary to promote better understanding among various religions, beliefs and cultures. It is also desirable to spread the message of universal respect for cultures and religions by all and for all. The United Nations can play a catalytic role in that noble endeavour.

The challenge before us is to transform the diversity of cultures, religions, traditions and customs into a unifying force. That force can contain the proliferation of ethnic, religious and civil conflicts. It can also eliminate the existing sense of insecurity and fear. In the final analysis, it can contribute to the global transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace. Indeed, each year Bangladesh submits to the General Assembly a draft resolution on a culture of peace, which gains the overwhelming support of member States. We shall do the same during the current session, and we look forward to the same level of support.

Bangladesh has always played an important role in the maintenance of international peace and security. Our commitment to United Nations peacekeeping as a major troop-contributing country remains unwavering. With the growing mandate of peacekeeping operations, peacebuilding responsibilities — which include many of the subjects we are talking about today — now play important role in post-conflict situations. We believe that the promotion of tolerance and cultural diversity can substantially reduce conflict and crime. We also underscore the importance of inclusion of the culture of peace in the operational activities of the Peacebuilding Commission. In our own country, Bangladesh, followers of different faiths live in a state

of tranquil harmony, as we have managed to inculcate in our people a sense of tolerance and respect for diversity.

The great religions and faiths of the world profess and promote the same values. These relate to the sanctity of human life, peace, justice and tolerance. Is that too tall an order or too high an aim for humanity to conform to? I do not think so. Earlier today when you spoke, Sir, you quoted from Dante Alighieri, that great Italian writer of the Renaissance. Another great poet said, and said very aptly that man's reach should exceed his grasp, for what else are the heavens for?

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency The Honourable S. K. Boafo, Minister for Chieftaincy and Culture of Ghana.

Mr. Boafo (Ghana): It is a privilege for me to participate in this very important meeting to engage in dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. In view of globalization, every nation should strive for peaceful coexistence with every other. The importance of dialogue on issues that can create peace cannot be underestimated.

Modern pluralistic societies, if they wish to ensure peace and preserve the well-being of their citizens, cannot afford to pay the price of cultural and religious monologue or cultural and religious fundamentalism. In this technological era, when distances between continents have become insignificant and when the populations of many countries have acquired a multinational and multi-ethnic character, the development of a democratic society is impossible without enabling each citizen to integrate his or her values and principles with the values of other cultural and religious groups.

Certain values and principles are universally shaped and cut across all civilizations, be they Western, European, Asian or African, in establishing a sense of human community. They propound basic truths and standards of behaviour that constitute the very basis of social cohesion and collective efforts. Any dialogue must therefore focus on the importance of shared values which give meaning to life and provide form and substance to identities. It must also foster respect for the other and acknowledge and uphold diversity.

In situations of major social and economic transformation, often induced by the consequences of globalization, the constant promotion and renewed awareness of ethical principles and human rights are of key importance. I am therefore happy to inform the Assembly that the 1992 constitution of Ghana recognized the key issue of human rights which is manifested in its preamble.

Intercultural and interreligious contacts and exchanges open new opportunities for societies to better understand others and themselves. Such interaction is therefore an integral feature of and precondition for social progress and peacebuilding. This High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is an opportune forum for all of us, especially in this era, when the world is embroiled in inter-ethnic, intercultural and interreligious conflicts. It is expected that this Dialogue will assist countries that have such challenges to find lasting solutions and deepen their understanding in that respect.

Having expressed my country's support for this Dialogue, I wish to share a few experiences from Ghana which have created a sense of peaceful coexistence and harmony among our varied cultures and religions. That has been achieved through the promotion of respect for values and attitudes and policies based on mutual respect, understanding and non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, faith or other cultural characteristics.

Our diverse culture has its roots in our institution of chieftaincy, which plays a vital function in peacebuilding and partnering with Government to create peace within our communities. Our chiefs extend compassion to everyone, irrespective of faith, culture or origin. Our traditional values are also geared towards sustaining and protecting the environment, which sometimes involves issues that create recipes for conflicts.

In Ghana, all the religious institutions team up with the Government to create a peaceful environment for our people. The communication machinery, be it governmental or private, allows different faiths and cultures to utilize its facilities without any hindrance.

Despite the different cultures existing in Ghana, there is always unity in diversity in everything that our people do. Therefore, Government has little to grapple with in the area of conflicts among the cultures and religions that are a common denominator in our lives. Culture and religion have blended so well that it is

difficult to identify the lines of division. For instance, traditional music, drumming and dancing are common practices in our churches, which are mostly of the Western tradition. It behoves all countries, in particular those that have interreligious and intercultural challenges, to learn from other countries and regions that have successfully managed religions among cultures and regions.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Tarek Mitri, Minister of Culture and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of Lebanon.

Mr. Mitri (Lebanon) (*spoke in Arabic*): First, I wish to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of your new and responsible task. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Secretary-General and to your predecessor, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa. My thanks go also to the delegations of the Philippines and Pakistan for all of the efforts they have made.

Interest in this subject is increasing due to repeated initiatives on the subject, and because of the difficulties that arise in relations among nations and the dangers and fears caused by ignorance in the face of policies that manipulate religious symbols, emotions and cultural characteristics in the fight for power. Because of their extremism, such policies force us to assert our identity and individualism and to feel hostility towards others, whether they be near or far away.

The international community's interest in dialogue has intensified as a result of concern about new and renewed phenomena characterized by religious and ethnic violence, terrorism, intimidation and disinformation intended to slander and humiliate others. Efforts have been made to improve understanding, but such efforts should not be the province of our elites; rather, they should be the work of society as a whole. This problem must be addressed urgently, not just over the long term.

Over the past two decades, against a background of tension and confrontation, attempts have been made to address fanaticism and extremism and to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. The increased demand for dialogue among intellectuals and adherents of various religions encourages us to wonder whether its promises are realistic. We must promote such initiatives on the basis of two perspectives: credibility and effectiveness. Credibility means not only good intentions, but also the capacity to be serious and to be respected by the broadest majority of people. Obviously, effectiveness does not mean immediate change; rather, it means tangible effects on mindsets, feelings and attitudes and, indirectly, on the development of relationships and events.

We must also be more specific in defining the goals of dialogue so that we can highlight its value and agree on its rules. Dialogue, like culture and religion, has many meanings. That is why it lends itself to a multitude of uncoordinated and sometimes divergent efforts. Lebanon has been dealing with this issue, because we have made dialogue part of our national consciousness. Our country's message is that we attach great importance to dialogue, although we have not always succeeded in building the confidence of Lebanese citizens in dialogue's capacity to strengthen citizenship, equality, respect for diversity and coexistence, to which our constitution refers several times.

At this time of religious and political division and tensions — whatever the reasons behind them may be — we are facing challenges as a result of the dialogue of life. Those challenges pose difficulties for us in our attempts to preserve our unity and diversity. Ensuring unity in the areas of culture and politics can threaten the richness of our diversity and our ability to benefit from that richness. Sometimes we fear that diversity threatens our national identity and allegiance; such fear leads to alienation. Thus, we must always choose the potential offered by dialogue, which is sometimes lacking in situations of confrontation.

Dialogue is not a search for agreement at any cost; it requires that we accept and embrace difference and that we put it in its proper context, rather than either minimizing or exaggerating it. Dialogue does not eliminate rivalry or confrontation, but proposes a way to organize those elements without succumbing to an endless negotiating process. Negotiation is limited by power relationships, while dialogue helps to liberate us from them and to change and sometimes even restructure them by putting the parties on an equal footing. Dialogue opens the door that we close when people are reduced to a single category, mould and identity, whereas identities are in fact interlocked and diverse.

In Lebanon and other countries, the idea has arisen that religious and cultural groups have harmonious personalities and unique characteristics. Individuals have an idealized image of their own communities in comparison with those of others. Thus, the differences of others are seen as flaws and defects. The essence of the group is personified in the individual. That justifies reduced accountability when reprehensible acts are committed by those who belong to the same religious community or nationality, even if they live far away. Thus, violence — whether real or symbolic — spreads. Distant conflicts can thus affect relationships between neighbours. Several countries, including my own, face that danger, which serves the political purposes of foreign interference and runs counter to the common interest of the national community. Our experience has shown us that dialogue is credible and effective and that it can promote the autonomy of individuals, particularly at difficult times of ideological mobilization. Dialogue enables us to move away from intimidation and provides an alternative path of differing points of view. Dialogue enables us to put out the fires ignited by various conflicts.

The United Nations and its agencies have embarked on various initiatives and programmes that the General Assembly adopted last year. We are seeking to expand the number of participants in these exchanges of views and to encourage dialogue and understanding. But we must not stop there. Dialogue is a language, a culture and a paradigm for communications; it is not limited to intellectuals or religious dignitaries. Dialogue involves us all, particularly the media and politicians. Their statements, news stories and images often emphasize sensationalism and generalizations rather than providing explanations and details.

For many people, particularly those living in diverse societies, genuine and effective dialogue remains the alternative to clashes of ignorance, which draw borders of blood between religions, cultures, countries and regions. The United Nations has understood what is at stake; we are all confronting this renewed challenge with respect to religious, moral and cultural values. We must recall that when we choose dialogue and its culture, we respect the Charter of the United Nations.

I should like to close by noting that Lebanon's close relationship with the United Nations ensures that the Organization will not forget our country and will focus on Lebanon's defence of its freedom, independence and stability. Thus, Lebanon can remain faithful to its role as a witness to the richness and vitality of this dialogue among various religions and cultures.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Nitya Pibulsonggram, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Thailand.

Mr. Pibulsonggram (Thailand): Sixty-two years ago, our predecessors, inspired by a shared aspiration to save succeeding generations from the scourge of conflict, created this institution, the United Nations, on the basis of a common faith: faith in the ability of humanity to resolve its differences peacefully. That faith is based fundamentally on the following belief: that differences, whether in ideas or in values, in political systems or in cultural heritage, are not barriers to cooperation; and that differences need not be feared, but rather should be celebrated, as they reflect the rich diversity of humanity, of civilization and of history. Our United Nations was founded to promote respect for this diversity among nations, to promote cooperation between countries, despite differences, for the betterment of humanity as a whole.

Today, this Organization — indeed, this generation — faces a great challenge, one posed by a rising culture of intolerance and extremism, of disrespect and violence. For some, this is being perceived as no less than an impending clash among civilizations. But whatever it is called, this phenomenon is the very antithesis of what the United Nations stands for, because it challenges the very notion of respect for the diversity of humanity. We cannot let this come to pass.

There are many causes for this rising intolerance and lessening of mutual respect, ranging from a perceived sense of injustice to misunderstandings or miscommunication. Many times this intolerance, this violence, is propagated by the few to misguide the many in order to bring harm to them, or harm to all. For some, it involves portraying a problem as a religious conflict where in fact there is none. Indeed, this is what some are trying to do in my own country, Thailand, and they have failed utterly. No one believes them.

Such intolerance, whatever the cause may be, if not addressed, will likely exacerbate misunderstanding.

This could lead to distrust, to disagreement and, of course, to dispute. We cannot let this happen.

For all these reasons and more, the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is as timely as it is necessary. Here, I wish to commend the Philippines and Pakistan for their pivotal role in helping to realize this important meeting, because now is the time. It is the time for the moderate majority, for those who believe in tolerance and respect for diversity, to speak out and take action.

The question before us is: what is the best way to achieve this? How do we move from noble ideas to concrete action? How do we feasibly promote greater respect for cultural diversity and tolerance in our societies and between societies? How do we inculcate a culture of peace in our countries and around the world?

We ourselves will have to take the first step, within our own countries and within our respective regions. In the Kingdom of Thailand, our new Constitution continues to protect and to promote religious freedoms, with our Monarch serving as Defender of all Faiths. Interfaith dialogue is organized by local religious leaders to address common problems shared by people of various faiths in the same community — problems such as environmental degradation, for example.

In our region of South-East Asia we have countries that are predominantly Muslim, Christian and Buddhist, all working together to building an Association of Southeast Asian Nations community where diversity is considered to be a source of strength. Each nation, each region, will identify its own best means to promote tolerance and respect for diversity, in a manner that reaches out to the grass roots. This is not something that can be imposed from without, least of all by the United Nations; but it is something that can be encouraged, because tolerance and respect for diversity are universal values, beneficial to all, detrimental to none — save for those who stand to lose, such as extremists.

The second step is to identify critical target groups to determine the critical instruments that can help accelerate the momentum of support for a culture of peace and tolerance. Here, I believe the key target group is youth, and the key instrument is education — an education that inculcates tolerance and respect for the values of other cultures and faiths, a curriculum that promotes understanding of different cultures while promoting pride in one's own, and also an exchange programme that enables youths to be exposed to peoples of different cultures and beliefs, whether in their own countries or beyond.

We have tried using these tools in our own country. A new course on all the religions in Thailand is being designed, with a view to enhancing tolerance in our pluralistic society. Exchange programmes to bring our youths of one religion to live in communities belonging to another religion, as well as in other countries, are being implemented.

The third step is to coordinate and consolidate our various efforts at the global level to promote respect for diversity and tolerance. There are many important initiatives in this regard, and they all have great added value. But we can always seek to avoid duplication of efforts.

General Assembly resolution 61/221 on this issue, which Thailand co-sponsored, requests the Secretary-General to ensure the systematic and organizational follow-up on all such initiatives within the United Nations framework. In his report dated 25 September 2007 (A/62/337), the Secretary-General has taken an important first step by compiling activities undertaken under these initiatives, including the important contributions by UNESCO. Perhaps further efforts would also include interfacing with similar initiatives outside the United Nations, including regional and interregional initiatives.

No peace among humankind can long endure if cultural and civilizational fault lines are allowed to form and to deepen. No progress for humanity can be sustained for long if trust and tolerance are overshadowed by misunderstanding and hatred, because the threat of religious intolerance, the danger of intercultural conflict, can emanate from not only between civilizations and countries but also from within nations and societies. Such intolerance, such conflict, whether between countries or within nations, are unacceptable.

It is thus up to us, women and men of goodwill, to see to it that a culture of peace and a culture of tolerance prevail and flourish. It is up to us, the Member States of the United Nations, to see to it that a core value of this Organization — respect for diversity — is nurtured and sustained. For only through goodwill among nations, understanding among peoples

and concerted action among Member States, all based on mutual respect, can we be assured that the challenge posed by intolerance and extremism will be surmounted.

In this important task, we cannot afford to fail.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Sven Alkalaj, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mr. Alkalaj (Bosnia and Herzegovina): It is my great pleasure and honour to be here with you today and I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the President of the United Nations General Assembly and the Governments of the Philippines and Pakistan for convening this meeting on such an important topic.

Dialogue, respect and coexistence are the three keys words for a better world and a sustainable future, where reconciliation will lead to the termination of conflict and overcoming the "us vs. them" mentality, leading us into a world of tolerance, peace and true prosperity. From the whole range of cultures and peoples around the world and the whole range of religions and attitudes found on our planet to the extraordinary multiplicity of the natural world, we depend on diversity.

Diversity is the real spice of our lives and has become a factor much sought after and, at the same time, much feared. Recognizing of our common destiny as human beings can help us overcome the "us vs. them" mentality. Unity and diversity must be our common goal.

But how do we reach this goal? The United Nations has provided an excellent forum for the exchange of views on how to attain this goal. Through the constant activity of its main bodies and many initiatives, the United Nations provides guidelines and additional impetus to Member States, encouraging them to pursue, in their activities and efforts, the promotion of tolerance and understanding, as well as universal respect for religious and cultural diversity.

Dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions has great potential for aiding conflict prevention on the international, national and local levels by reducing misunderstanding and mistrust and by laying the foundations for the non-violent resolution of conflict. It also has enormous potential for solving current and future political, social and economic problems by encouraging people to share their experiences, knowledge, trust and all the beautiful expressions and content of the real spice of our life, namely, diversity.

The need for dialogue between cultures and religions has become a fact of life. Respect for all things that are different from ourselves and from our own system of values can help in understanding these things as well as other people's visions of the future, their core beliefs and the content of their lives. The values and viewpoints of one's own civilization, culture, religion and system must not be taken as absolute and universal. Only once this view is adopted can we really be sure that the ground has been laid for dialogue and for hope for a better, violence-free world.

People from all over the world, with all kinds of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, work, learn and live together every day. That is the environment that makes tolerance important and brings about an appreciation of diversity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of those places at the crossroad between East and West, North and South. It is just like a small world. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are all found in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are almost a bridge between civilizations. It is here that Western rationality meets Eastern sentiment, ultimately making Bosnia and Herzegovina such a wonderful and vibrant community.

For centuries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people lived not only side by side with one another — Muslims, Jews, Christians — but lived as one with one another. Abundant proof of this coexistence can be found in every step you take in Bosnia and Herzegovina: in its culture, literature, architecture — everywhere. In our capital, Sarajevo, you can find within a 200 metres circle, a synagogue, a mosque and Catholic and Orthodox churches that have been standing next to each other since the fifteenth century, almost leaning on each other and supporting one another, without being inconvenienced by the other in any way.

Such a rich cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its diversity of cultures, religions and people, ultimately enriches our lives. Children grow up aware of differences, but they are taught tolerance and respect for their friends and neighbours — a lesson that has been passed down from generation to generation.

It is important to instil those same values in children around the world. They are the future, and teaching them tolerance, respect and appreciation for cultures and religions will prove as important as teaching them writing and the basics of mathematics. But teaching our children will mean nothing, if we do not lead by our example.

Many preach tolerance and respect, but it cannot simply end with preaching. To take the next step and practice what we preach is what needs to be done. Religious groups and religious leaders around the world have a very important duty when it comes to interreligious and intercultural cooperation. Interreligious dialogue as a dimension of intercultural communication will have reached its full potential when a priest in a church, an imam in a mosque and a rabbi in a synagogue talk to each other and work with each other, conveying a common message, a message of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding.

Religious communities have enormous potential to become a positive force for peace and tolerance by making it clear that an attack against one faith is an attack against all faiths. Such collaboration and dialogue based on mutual respect represents key instruments for improving relations and cooperation among peoples and countries.

Nowadays, more than ever, people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are fully aware that there will be no prosperous future without true reconciliation, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its experience and history, can fully contribute to a dialogue between cultures and religions. On the international level, Bosnia and Herzegovina is very proud of its Interreligious Council and its tremendous potential for the future. A magnificent venue for cooperation, collaboration and dialogue, this interreligious body, together with religious communities, can help us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has reached many of its goals. We are determined to reach all of them. We are dedicated to building a praiseworthy society with the highest of ethical norms based on dialogue, understanding and acceptance. We are armed with courage to face the differences and diversities of others. We cooperate interreligiously and interculturally, we cooperate for peace.

To share and discuss points of view on such matters is necessary and important, but unfortunately, not enough. Education, from the youngest age, is a prerequisite for a better life and future. Our ultimate challenge seems to be to educate a new generation capable of building a new spirit, one which accepts and respects diversity, capable of accepting rather than excluding, forgiving rather than hating.

We all know that it has always been easy to point out differences among ourselves. What we must do, however, is to focus on what we have in common and realize that we are bound by those commonalities. Then, when it comes to our differences, we can learn that they are not obstacles in our lives, but something to appreciate. We must not only respect our differences, but we must learn how to make use of them, how to learn from each other and how to appreciate that which differentiates us.

The time has come to move beyond just tolerance. Diversity is not something to be endured, but rather it is something that we, as a society, must actively engage ourselves in every day.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Agustin Komoe, Minister of Culture and la Francophonie of Côte d'Ivoire.

Mr. Komoe (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): It is an honour for me to address this Assembly to discuss understanding among religions and cultures, and cooperation for peace.

This subject is of great importance for my country, Côte d'Ivoire, which is a nation-State of West Africa on the Gulf of Guinea, covering 322,000 square kilometres. Côte d'Ivoire is an ethnic mosaic of more than 60 ethnicities, which can be classified into four main groups. With a population of 16 million, we host between 4 and 5 million foreigners — almost one third of the population, a case almost unique in the world.

Linguistically, our country offers diversity just as great, counting some 70 languages, even though the official language and the language used in schools is French.

Turning to religion, Côte d'Ivoire offers to the world a model of syncretism and peaceful interfaith coexistence. There is no majority religion in Côte d'Ivoire. More than one third of Ivorians are Muslims, 22 per cent are Christians and 17 per cent of our population has remained faithful to traditional or

non-revealed religions, which have had a considerable influence on the other beliefs. Lastly, 17 per cent of Ivorians have chosen other religious faiths.

So far, coexistence between these various religions has not led to any major conflict. Each citizen practices his faith while strictly observing freedom of worship and the secular nature of the State. Furthermore, the motto and the national anthem of Côte d'Ivoire emphasize the virtues of work, discipline, union and hospitality.

The same goes for our constitution, which emphatically stresses respect for freedoms and the need for a civic life underpinned by democracy. How can one not mention inter-ethnic alliances that are veritable social cement, serving as covenants between peoples and ethnic groups? When these alliances take place in a family setting, they are the subject of friendly banter. These agreements seal the social contract among the communities involved.

Therefore, the nation is rebuilding and is gradually reducing its difficult toll of divisions from the past. Our rich and diversified cultural heritage calls upon citizens to own their traditions and customs in order to better participate in the dialogue of cultures and in the affirmation of their Ivorian cultural exception.

The military and political crisis that we are gradually but resolutely emerging from has reaffirmed the importance of solidarity at the national, regional and global scales. The Economic Community of West African States, the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the United Nations have helped Ivorians throughout our social crisis, which could have become irreparable, contributing greatly to limiting the harmful effects of the crisis. The attitude of the United Nations in view of the Ouagadougou Accord, as well as the conclusive results, show the need to help in the resolution of conflicts while remaining attentive to the fundamental needs of the players.

The Ivorian crisis — the problems as well as the process of resolving them — is an obvious example of the consubstantial and incompressible nature of our cultural exception and of the dialogue of cultures in our quest for peace and sustainable development through multilateral cooperation. This is why Côte d'Ivoire is pleased that it ratified the conventions and protocols that should give the world the proper defences essential for making them long-term.

Côte d'Ivoire also wants all peoples to be convinced that the culture of human abilities is more than traditions. Because of their identifying and economic dimensions, cultural products express the creative vitality of peoples and contribute to democratic awareness and social cohesion. That is why those who use violence, sometimes in the name of religion, seriously betray that message. We need to get out of this spiral of distrust, intolerance and violence, and restore religions in their ethic dimensions. Furthermore, if people who are culturally or religiously different overcome their distrust and exchange it for mutual human values, they will discover the extent to which they share and live with common values.

Côte d'Ivoire is made up of distinct communities, each with its own exclusive cultural characteristics. Accordingly, a citizen's feeling of belonging and of cultural identity often depends on his degree of familiarity with the cultural characteristics of his own community and those of others.

Consequently, our Government's policy helps people become familiar with the characteristics of the society of which they are a part and, in doing so, strengthens their feeling of belonging and cultural identity. Accordingly the Ministry of Culture seeks, inter alia, to promote the creation, spread and preservation of culture and access to that creation throughout the national territory, and to think about the issues that the society should consider in order to get to know each other better.

This is how the manner of being, acting, speaking and thinking as Ivorians forms a whole, a relatively stable and open system that can preserve and impart itself from one generation to another, while improving on contributions from outside.

This approach mainstreams the plurality and mobility that characterize the elements that make up cultures. In addition to the necessary diversity of traditions and dialogue of cultures, the concept, the basic element, of culture is inherent in humanity. Languages differ, and with them the methods of symbolizing, conceptualizing and theorizing. Forms of labour and production also vary in time and space. Lastly, judicial, moral and political institutions vary as well.

That is why culture is not just an issue of ethnicity. It is a fundamental human fact, the combined play of symbolism and imagination. Culture is closely

connected with language and work, but it cannot really be reduced to just that. Religious life and political life, and sometimes both, play a very important role in human societies, but they assume forms that do not lend themselves to a single definition.

Accordingly, the variety of cultures is enormous. However, this cultural diversity does not mean that cultures are heterogeneous and without any connecting points or unifying factors. Unity may be the result of the persistence of a common identity — that of a nature, a condition or a shared code of conduct. They can also result from a history that is sometimes very checkered, progressive and adaptive. Cultures start out by being alien to each other, sometimes hostile. Each considers itself exclusive and superior, but gradually these cultures intermingle and start to question their own foundation.

The distribution on a scale of conflicts shows that tension is not merely between a common culture and future interpretations of it. The distribution of culture within a given society reflects a hierarchy of institutions and social status, and from that, wrenching situations of inequality and privation result. Culture involves mechanisms of inclusion, but also of exclusion. These are not just the result of spontaneous, uncontrollable social tendencies, but are also acts that have to do with conflict of ownership, both real and symbolic, and sometimes they have to do with strategies of controls.

Peace is inconceivable without the active participation of conscientious citizens. Peace is rooted in social justice, respect for human rights and the implementation of international law. That is why the emergence of civil society as a new stakeholder for peace opens up important prospects for resolving and even preventing conflicts.

As an example of the quest for hegemony, world military expenditures increased by 34 per cent between 1996 and 2005 and are now reckoned to be $1,118 trillion, at a time when a billion people are living in extreme poverty. Surely something can be done to develop, democratize and disarm.

Furthermore, the theme of the debate and the thinking at this meeting reflect existential problems. Relations between religions and cultures must help build peace between peoples; otherwise extremism and intolerance will impede sustainable development.

It is the mission of humankind to enshrine brotherhood and build bridges between religions and cultures to bring about true peace. Tolerance, solidarity and brotherly love proceed from a culture that respects religious and cultural foundations. Therefore, we could say, paraphrasing one of the pioneers of negritude, that Côte d'Ivoire is a hand that is wounded but open to the world and to people of goodwill, seeking fair trade and global solidarity.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Cheikh Tidiane Sy, Minister of Justice of Senegal.

Mr. Sy (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): I should like at the outset to warmly congratulate you, Mr. President, on the excellent initiative to hold the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, at a time when doubt seems to beset us and when conflict situations — particularly those arising out of lack of understanding and religious intolerance — are multiplying and becoming increasingly complex.

The holding of this debate is further proof of the international community's resolute commitment to working to strengthen dialogue among peoples, cultures and religions in order to frustrate the efforts of prophets of doom and deny the theories of those who believe in an inevitable clash of civilizations. In that regard, several national, regional and international initiatives have already been taken to lay the foundations for a fruitful dialogue among cultures and religions. That is reflected in the report of the Secretary-General (A/62/337), in which he reports on efforts being made by the principal institutions of the United Nations system working in this area. In that connection, I should like to welcome the relevant initiatives of UNESCO and the praiseworthy efforts of the Alliance of Civilizations. I can assure the Assembly that Senegal, as always, is engaged alongside all those who are working to bring people together, to overcome obstacles born of a lack of understanding and to fight intolerance.

Today more than ever before, the world is wracked by crises whose principal causes include, inter alia, religious differences, intolerance and the extremism of certain people having hidden agendas. In the name of supposed religious or cultural convictions, those people are committing terrible atrocities whose main victims are often innocent women and children. Such actions, fuelled and maintained by ignorance, run

counter to the principles and precepts of every religion and reflect contempt for and violation of the sanctity of human life. We must eradicate forever this phenomenon, which has increased so much over the past few years.

That is precisely why this encounter is so relevant: it should enable us to embark on paths of reflection aimed at overcoming any attempt to manipulate religious or cultural specificities for hidden purposes. I believe that the time has come to establish an open and unconditional dialogue that can enable us to remove obstacles, move beyond clichés and stereotypes and instil respect, acceptance and understanding among peoples.

The success of such a dialogue will depend greatly on our commitment to demonstrating our attachment to certain common universal values, such as justice and equity, and our determination to eliminate antagonism and discord. It will also have to be predicated on mutual respect and acceptance of others' differences, as an alternative to cultural contempt. Mutual respect is a sine qua non for any dialogue and indeed for any joint human endeavour, for, as former Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared, "We can love what we are, without hating what we are not" (*A/56/PV.42, p. 3*).

Those words of Kofi Annan are well understood in my country, Senegal, where the 95 per cent of the people who are Muslim and the 5 per cent who are Christian live in peaceful coexistence on the basis of shared values of tolerance and respect for others. This interfaith coexistence is so deeply rooted in Senegal that it is not rare to find Christians and Muslims in the same family as a result of mixed marriages, which have become a tangible sociological reality.

However, in order to consolidate and strengthen that achievement, which is a result of the open spirit of the Senegalese and their natural impulse to engage in dialogue, we constantly invite people to attend interfaith meetings to overcome prejudice and lack of understanding. For it is true that, despite our physical proximity, intolerance and extremism can separate us from one another. It is precisely to invigorate and share this valuable achievement that the President of the Republic of Senegal, Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, has called for the holding of a summit on Islamic-Christian dialogue — an appeal that I should like to solemnly reiterate here.

However, President Wade, in the printed text of the statement he made during last week's general debate at the present session of the General Assembly, recalled:

> "It is unacceptable that the feelings of more than a billion Muslims continue to be attacked by ill-intentioned individuals in the name of a supposedly limitless freedom of expression. All freedoms are limited by responsibility."

Freedom of expression, respect for human rights and democracy all require moral authority so that they can be not only consolidated and strengthened, but also, and above all, refined. Those principles remain fragile and require a framework to prevent both censorship and a drift away from them, which often has tragic consequences for innocent people. That is why all sectors of society in all countries of the world must be fully involved in this endeavour of dialogue so as to build a reliable and viable consensus.

As President Wade has said, the international community must, without delay, cooperate to find paths of peaceful coexistence for current and future generations. How can we make the world's political leaders, intellectuals and religious leaders shoulder their responsibility to put an end to extremists' use of religion? Indeed, it is important to say loudly and clearly that such extremism results from a misunderstanding of holy writ. This quest for peace and harmony among people is everyone's responsibility, but the media have a primary role: to help us gain better understanding and avoid the pitfall of facile criticism and caricature. To banish the demon of intolerance is to eliminate the sources of misunderstanding among peoples and to educate our young people to accept differences and respect others.

No culture is superior to another; no civilization can presume to teach lessons to others. Everyone has the right to dignity and respect for his or her religious convictions. That is the golden rule that must be the basis for dialogue among religions and cultures.

The President: I now call on His Excellency The Rev. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, Presidential Adviser on Foreign Affairs and former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nicaragua.

Mr. d'Escoto Brockmann (Nicaragua) (*spoke in Spanish*): May the all merciful God of love, peace, non-violence, unity, reconciliation and solidarity

enlighten our minds and open our hearts, so that all of us together as brothers and sisters, children of the same father will be able to take strong steps towards creating the culture of peace and non-violence that is so badly needed in the world.

Nicaragua celebrates the fact that the United Nations is discussing dialogue, understanding and cooperation among religions and cultures for peace. We would like to congratulate the Philippines and Pakistan for that important initiative.

Nicaragua strongly believes that there is nothing more urgent in the world than to set ourselves free from the terrible human addiction to violence, whether it is used to appropriate the belongings of others or in self-defence. It is absolutely clear that what is most needed in the world is a culture of peace to counteract the culture of war, death and destruction, or terrorism disguised under the name of low-intensity warfare, preventive warfare or any other such camouflage. Our Organization was created specifically to put an end to the cycle of war which, by the middle of the last century, had resulted in two world wars.

Respect for the principles of the Charter of our Organization was supposed to put an end at least to megawars. But if we look at the United Nations from the perspective of its effectiveness in avoiding war, we would have to conclude that it has not been effective at all. Among the mightiest of our own Members we find those who are the most powerfully addicted to warfare as a tool to advance their own interests.

The international political dialogue has not managed to stop wars. They seem to be increasing in number day by day and threaten to continue to multiply with the insane concept of preventive war whereby the potential aggressor resorts to his crystal ball to identify the next target of his aggression and occupation. Among the permanent members of the Security Council itself, you will find some who have tried to convert the Council into a clearing house to approve or license their war plans.

In the meantime, the great majority of our Members can only watch from the sidelines, because at the level of political dialogue it is considered politically incorrect to draw attention to or criticize the powerful even when the most egregious violations of the Charter are being committed.

We must therefore go beyond a purely political dialogue to meet each other at the deepest level of our shared humanity — in other words, on the terrain of our religions where we find the most deeply rooted beliefs concerning the value and meaning of human life. We are keenly aware that interfaith dialogue is not without arrogance and other flaws that often derail political dialogue. For that reason, Nicaragua would be inclined to promote cooperation among religions in the context of the creation of a culture of peace.

Ecumenical dialogue is very important, but we believe that through ecumenical cooperation we will be able to discover more rapidly that there are far more things that unite human beings than things that supposedly separate us. The supreme principle of unconditional love without exception or exclusion is undoubtedly the most important value that ties all religions together. It will be through a mutual discovery of our values, concrete cooperation and through the creation of a culture of peace and non-violence that we will be better able to advance towards greater understanding between religions and the cultures they influence.

It is through our religious faith and the teachings of our religions that most of us find universal fraternity. We are all brothers and sisters because we are all children of the same father. In other words, because God is everyone's father, so we are all brothers and sisters created to live in peace and harmony as stewards of creation. But creation does not belong to us, for God is the only Lord and master of life and of everything that exists in creation.

Nothing could be more contrary to the will of our common father and creator than the reliance on warfare that has become the greatest scourge in the world. All who have reached that conclusion by the path of culture, religion or ethics have a duty to speak out in favour of a culture of peace and non-violence. It is also incumbent upon us to rid ourselves once and for all of the thought that denouncing the reliance on war practised by the powerful is politically incorrect. On the contrary, not to denounce that concept as forcefully as it deserves to be denounced would be suicidal and unacceptable from an ethical and religious point of view.

It is through love of God and our neighbours that we will find the strength to unfailingly struggle for a culture of peace and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi is

a prime example for us all. On one occasion, noting that Gandhi had a picture of Jesus on his wall, Louis Fischer, his famous biographer, asked him why he had a picture of Jesus on his wall when he was not Christian. And Gandhi replied that he was, of course, Christian and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and Jewish. God is the same god and, through our different religions, teaches us that love and peace must be the essential qualities in the lives of the children of God — in other words, all the men and women on Earth.

The President: I now give the floor to His Eminence Metropolitan Valentin of Orenburg, Leader of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Russian Federation.

Metropolitan Valentin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Cooperation among religions and cultures is becoming tremendously important in today's world, which is confronting exacerbated inter-ethnic political and social contradictions, attempts to use religion to justify terrorism and extremism, and the failure of the secular system of social relations to properly address certain challenges that relate to spiritual matters.

More and more people today are concluding that attempts to deny religion the right to be heard in the public forum — to make it the business of private life alone — that these attempts are futile and constitute encroachment on human freedom. The main problem of societies that are losing the concept of religion is that they are too fragmented. Clearly, the cult of consumerism and rampant egoism make them unstable and divided. Without the spiritual, vertical dimension of life, people's lives will not be made happier by money, things, entertainment or technology. Without allegiance to the eternal moral principles, individuals cannot maintain or make an ideal either of the law or of freedom. I am convinced that it is precisely traditional morality that can be the solid foundation of the peaceful coexistence of peoples of various cultures and religions.

One of the factors leading to the growth of extremism is religious illiteracy among many of our contemporaries. That is why it is so essential to educate young generations in the spirit of traditional religions. Recently, this idea was supported by the President of the Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir Putin. I believe that everywhere where people so desire they must have the right to receive in-depth knowledge in a regular public school about their religious tradition, and also basic knowledge about the views and convictions of those living side by side with them.

The Russian model of interreligious relations has long been built on respect for the faith and the way of life and customs of traditional communities, and for the principles of establishing a family and a social entity among them. The inhabitants of our country have different faiths; but we have always recognized the right of us all to live and act according to our principles, both in private life and in public life. It is precisely that which has created the conditions for civil peace and strengthened stability. As a result, Russia has never had religious wars. Today, communities of the traditional religions of Russia, namely Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, continue their centuries-old interreligious dialogue.

The Interreligious Council of Russia, which was established in 1998, acts on the basis of the inviolability of religious teachings and of moral rules, which, to a large extent, are the same across religions. We were convinced that our model of dialogue was the right one at the World Summit of Religious Leaders held in Moscow in July 2006. Authoritative religious leaders from 49 countries supported our concept regarding the link between human freedom and moral responsibility.

The universal nature of the United Nations makes it crucial to take into account the spiritual traditions and diversity of world cultures and religions. In recent years, attention to this factor has been reflected in various initiatives within the context of this world Organization. These include the Alliance of Civilizations, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, the Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, as well as other initiatives. Each of these initiatives is important and valuable. The World Summit of Religious Leaders unanimously supported a more systematic dialogue between the religious community and the United Nations.

Accordingly, I would imagine that it would make sense now to develop the outcomes of the Summit discussions and think about creating, under United Nations aegis, a special forum, a kind of consultative council of religions, for the exchange of views among representatives of the main world faiths. We hope that the activities of this council could help not just to

strengthen the foundations of interreligious peace, but also to enrich the process of the elaboration and adoption of decisions by the world community. This idea could become the subject of a thorough discussion at this and at future sessions of the General Assembly. And I am pleased that the High-level Dialogue provides a good opportunity to discuss such an important question.

I am grateful to the President of the General Assembly and to the countries that sponsored resolution A/61/269 and to the organizers of today's forum for implementing the initiative of the Dialogue that, for the first time, is taking place within the walls of this world Organization.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Hidayat Orujov, Head of the State Committee on Relations with Religious Organizations of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Orujov (Azerbaijan) (*spoke in Russian*): First of all, I should like to discharge the honourable duty entrusted to me by transmitting to this General Assembly the sincere greetings, as well as good wishes, of the people of Azerbaijan and the personal wishes of our head of State, President Ilham Aliyev. I express the hope that this meeting will be an important contribution in expanding cooperation among religious communities and cultures, conducive to global peace and security.

This stage of globalization brings peoples and populations closer together but exposes even more the characteristics that draw sustenance from a unique kind of mentality and expression of faith. Today, we are living at a time of heightened religious awareness, which sometimes takes on exaggerated forms. And sometimes it is maliciously exploited to fuel conflicts on religious grounds. For that reason, it is so crucial for tolerance to be established and to prevail.

I must say with a feeling of pride that tolerance, established by the civilized world as one of the main democratic values, is a characteristic of our people that has evolved over centuries and could serve as an example for others.

Historically speaking, Azerbaijan was a meeting place for various faiths and civilizations. Today, it is successfully carrying out that function. Together with Islam, other faiths have historically existed in Azerbaijan — Christianity and Judaism, among others. Basically, since time immemorial, Azerbaijan became a second homeland for people suffering from religious discrimination. People congregated in Azerbaijan with hope, not only the persecuted adherents of various religions, but adherents of various interpretations of Islam, too. Perhaps that is precisely why the population of Azerbaijan is so varied in ethnic and religious terms.

Fortunately, in Azerbaijan, where various faiths and religious trends were propagated throughout our history, relations of tolerance were established and prevailed between various communities. And we had no noted instances of xenophobia on ethnic, racial or religious grounds. Various groups that put down roots in the territory of Azerbaijan did not feel that they were outsiders and made themselves at home.

For example, the history of the emergence of Jews in Azerbaijan goes back a long, long way — 2,500 years — and during this enormous period of history, there is no evidence of any discrimination against them by the Azerbaijan people.

Christianity in Azerbaijan historically was one of the leading religions, and today our people views its past as being connected with that faith, as being a component of its glorious history. I am pleased that Azerbaijan is one of the few countries where mosque, church and synagogue coexist side by side, in peace, and where there are no instances of any discord between people of different religious faiths.

We note, however, with some bitterness the fact that Azerbaijani territory is still being occupied by Armenia, which is abusing the traditional tolerance of our people in carrying out at the State level a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. During the last century, more than one million Azerbaijanis lived in Armenia; today, not a single representative of our people remains there. The same fate hit Azerbaijanis living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, too. And regions contiguous with it are now occupied by the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia.

The General Assembly must agree that it is therefore hard to believe the statement about tolerance that we heard coming from the mouth of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Armenia today in this very Hall. Among the casualties of this aggression are our historical and religious monuments; the shrines of other faiths have also fallen victim. And this is before the eyes of the entire world. In our lands that have been occupied, they have razed our religious monuments to

the ground. Many times we have turned to this Organization and to the world community demanding that the four Security Council resolutions on the problem be implemented calling for the unconditional liberation of the lands occupied by Armenia.

More than a million citizens of Azerbaijan have been condemned to be refugees and have been forcibly displaced; and they must be returned to their ancestral homes. Yet, the occupier, Armenia, still does not want to give up its territorial appetites.

I appeal to you and through you, participants in this forum, to all countries and international organizations, and I call for your cooperation, in the name of restoring the trampled rights of a million of my compatriots rendered hapless by the occupiers. I call upon you to heed the voice of Azerbaijan, which for centuries has revered the lofty tenets of good-neighbourliness, love of humankind and tolerance inherent in all of the great religions.

I hope that the Azerbaijan people and my country will receive due, well-deserved consideration in this respect and that our experience will help and benefit other peoples and States.

The President: I give the floor to Senator Rod Kemp of Australia.

Mr. Kemp (Australia): The right to freedom of religion or belief is a basic right and an essential element of any harmonious society. It is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Unfortunately, in many areas of the world, many people do not enjoy these freedoms: they cannot worship freely; they suffer from discrimination. Religious intolerance and extremism continue to threaten global security, peace and stability. The importance of defending religious freedom, cannot, therefore be overstated.

To build and maintain free societies, we have to recognize that different ideas and beliefs can and should be allowed to coexist and flourish, because tolerance and respect for pluralism are essential values for an open society.

Australia is a culturally and linguistically diverse society, with about 300 languages spoken and a wide variety of religions practised. The Australian Government promotes acceptance and respect among Australians of all cultural and religious backgrounds.

In this context, Australia has implemented the "Living in Harmony" programme for several years, bringing Australians from different backgrounds together to forge a sense of belonging, mutual respect and understanding. More than 50 projects to promote interfaith dialogue have been funded under this programme.

In 2006, Australia embarked on a national action plan to build on social cohesion, harmony and security, to which the Australian Government has committed A$ 35 million over four years. Measures under the plan include the creation of a centre of research in Islamic studies, the promotion of interfaith understanding through interschool cooperation, employment and inter-community engagement projects, crisis management training and specialist education materials.

Australia strongly supports freedom of religion and belief and is determined to promote understanding and foster harmony between faith communities across our region. Our regional efforts aim to bridge cultural and religious differences and counter the spread of extremism.

Australia has fostered interfaith cooperation through our involvement in the Regional Interfaith Dialogue, a process which we co-sponsor with Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The inaugural Regional Interfaith Dialogue took place in Yogyakarta in 2004 and was co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia. New Zealand hosted the third Regional Interfaith Dialogue in Waitangi in May 2007. Participants in those dialogues are drawn from the major faith groups of the region, the 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, East Timor, Fiji, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. The 2007 Dialogue resulted in agreement on the Waitangi Declaration and Plan of Action. The Plan of Action outlined recommendations by representatives for future regional engagement on interfaith issues, particularly in the areas of partnership-building, education and media.

Interfaith dialogues are an important forum within which to promote peace, tolerance and understanding by working with faith and civil society groups in our region and beyond. Although Governments can play an important role in facilitating

dialogue, the responsibility for promoting tolerance and understanding between and within communities must rest with the communities themselves, particularly their leaders. Faith and community leaders have a critical role to play in denying extremists any religious or moral legitimacy and in building trust between communities.

Separately, Australia and the European Union will co-host a youth interfaith forum in Australia in December 2007. The event will focus on promoting understanding and encouraging personal links between young leaders of religious communities in South-East Asia, Australia and Europe. In support of interfaith dialogue processes, Australia is also hosting the Parliament of the World's Religions in 2009 — the world's largest multi-faith event, which is usually held every five years in different cities around the world.

Australia will continue to engage constructively on this issue with the Human Rights Council by encouraging the global promotion of religious tolerance in that important forum. The Council needs to play an active role in ensuring the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by monitoring international adherence to the provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Australia welcomes the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative to support projects that promote cross-cultural and religious understanding. Australia believes that its practical initiatives complement the interfaith activities taking place in our region.

We, the international community, should continue to forge interfaith and international partnerships that aim to ensure that the right to freedom of religion is respected in all countries.

The President: I call on His Excellency Mr. João Gomes Cravinho, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, who will speak on behalf of the European Union.

Mr. Gomes Cravinho (Portugal): In Portugal's role as European Union (EU) presidency, I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. We welcome this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, including the interactive hearing with representatives of civil society to take place this afternoon. We believe that Europe has a key role to play in the promotion of interreligious and intercultural understanding, along with other regions of the world.

In the history of international relations, the challenge for so long has been the peaceful coexistence of different value systems. Over the centuries, many different ways to avoid conflict have been sought. One solution is for nations to share peace and prosperity through dialogue, understanding and tolerance.

Mutual understanding does not entail imposing one's values, culture or faith on others. It involves respecting different values and beliefs based on an awareness of the common political, economic, social, ecological and cultural challenges that we face in an increasingly global and vulnerable world. It means protecting and promoting all human rights and fundamental freedoms that have been repeatedly reaffirmed as universal; it entails freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief; and it requires an open mind and the willingness to understand the pluralism of cultures, religions and beliefs.

Beyond those attitudes and intercultural competences, we must focus on concrete cooperation and common actions. Pluralism in European society and the legal, political and social conditions for coping with it have been major factors for prosperity and development. We must enhance mutual understanding on the basis of our firm conviction that human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression, are the common ground on which we stand.

Dialogue will succeed only if we make sure that both men and women's experiences and expertise are integrated effectively into our intercultural and interreligious dialogue and into social and political initiatives of conflict prevention at all levels. Dialogue will bear fruit only if we enable our youth to respond actively and positively to the challenges of our pluralistic and vulnerable world.

The European Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. Those principles are common to all member States and the EU is ready to play its part in the process. A common understanding and acceptance of core values among Europeans of all social, cultural and religious

backgrounds is crucial for peaceful cohabitation and social cohesion. In consequence, the EU applies its core values and principles in all of its policies and promotes them within Europe and beyond.

The European Union's integration and non-discrimination policies are guided by the following principles: the principle of equality before the law; the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of any ground and the fight against racism; respect for cultural, linguistic and religious diversity; and equality between men and women.

The EU promotes freedom of religion and belief throughout European societies and beyond, including through the media. The resolution introduced to the Assembly by the EU on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief, which was adopted last year by consensus, is but one example of our commitment to guarantee that fundamental freedom.

European culture has been enriched by outside influences throughout its history, and European culture and ideas have had a profound influence on many cultures throughout the world. Europeans of various social, cultural and religious backgrounds contribute to the diversity and prosperity of Europe today. Today's European identity is a multiple one; it reflects manifold and pluralist influences, including those of migration and globalization. Europe faces the challenges of continuously developing and strengthening the dialogue with its various communities, ethnic minorities and numerous religious communities, including the very positive engagement with Muslims of and in Europe. The European Union views its political and legal framework as essential to ensuring social peace and cohesion and to marginalizing radicalism and extremism on all sides. Freedom of religion, non-discrimination and recognition of religious communities in particular are crucial preconditions for any successful dialogue.

The importance of intercivilizational understanding is strongly reflected in European Union policy and action. The EU is active in promoting intercultural and interreligious understanding, both within Europe and with international partners. I would like to give some examples of initiatives strongly supported by the European Union that aim at promoting a more peaceful and cohesive society.

The Euromed Barcelona process provides a framework for dialogue between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners. It established the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures. The Foundation's main objective is to bring people and organizations from both shores of the Mediterranean closer to each other and to help bridge the gap between them. Particular importance is given to the development of human resources, while youth is the main target group. Another priority is the promotion of tolerance among people by furthering exchanges between members of diverse civil societies. The Foundation, which facilitates the coordination of 35 national networks, has programmes in the fields of media, education, women and youth.

With a membership of 43 Asian and European States, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is uniquely placed to foster links between Asia and Europe through interfaith and intercultural dialogue. ASEM Interfaith Dialogues have helped to build mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans in the fields of interfaith and interreligious relations. The third ASEM Interfaith Dialogue was held in Nanjing, China, in June this year. Together with the two previous meetings — in Bali, Indonesia in 2005, and in Larnaca, Cyprus, in 2006 — they addressed the relations of interfaith dialogue to peace, justice, compassion and tolerance. The Nanjing Statement issued at the end of the Dialogue reflected the role of interfaith dialogue in globalization, peace, social cohesion and development, and cultural and educational cooperation. A fourth Dialogue is scheduled for 2008 in Amsterdam.

Additionally, the ASEM partnership has achieved substantial results in boosting cultural, educational, intellectual and people-to-people exchanges, expanding and facilitating research, networking and promoting cultural diversity.

Europe is a strong supporter of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. It was proposed by the President of the Spanish Government in 2005 and co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime Minister. In April 2007, the Secretary-General appointed Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. The Alliance, with the endorsement of the Secretary-General, intends to galvanize collective action across diverse societies in order to combat extremism, overcome cultural and social barriers between mainly the Western and predominantly Muslim worlds, and

reduce tensions and polarization between societies that differ in religious and cultural values.

It is our understanding that, in order to most effectively move forward the agenda of dialogue and tolerance, the Alliance of Civilizations and other United Nations initiatives for enhancing dialogue and mutual understanding should be carried out in a coordinated, coherent, and complementary manner within the existing institutional framework. The EU sees the Alliance of Civilizations as a flagship initiative in that area, and we would see it as a potential focal point for the increasing number of initiatives. Through a better coordination of initiatives, rather than their proliferation, we improve our chances of making a difference.

Turning again to Europe, the Council of Europe white paper on intercultural dialogue is expected to be adopted in November 2007. On its website devoted entirely to the role of intercultural dialogue, the Council states its firm belief that

> "[d]ialogue between cultures, the oldest and most fundamental mode of democratic conversation, is an antidote to rejection and violence. Its objective is to enable us to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging".

Finally, in October 2005, the European Commission proposed that 2008 be declared the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. With a budget of €10 million, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue will present a wide variety of enriching concrete projects that will be implemented in the framework of EU programmes and other Community actions. The Year of Intercultural Dialogue will encourage the mobilization of civil society and actors at the European, national and local levels. Culture, education, youth, sport and citizenship will be the focus of activities.

To conclude, it is possible that the term "intercivilizational or intercultural dialogue" might be construed as an endorsement of the idea that humanity is divided by monolithic and entirely distinguishable civilizations, but that is far from accurate. In reality, the boundary lines between cultures are mostly unclear. Over time and space, different cultures influence each other profoundly. Most civilizations harbour people of different cultures who coexist peacefully. The European Union is committed to promoting dialogue and understanding, and to striving for universal appreciation of different religions, cultures and beliefs.

The President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Karen Hughes, Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs of the Department of State of the United States of America.

Ms. Hughes (United States of America): I am honoured to be here. I thank the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Srgjan Kerim, for convening this dialogue on religious and cultural understanding, and the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan and the Philippines for proposing it.

A noble framework — the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which President Bush cited here last week — guides our work. It recognizes that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" and the right to manifest those beliefs in "teaching, practice, worship and observance" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18*). This historic Declaration states that the right of religious freedom is both universal and human, applying to all people in all places.

Unfortunately, in too many places today, people are still persecuted for their beliefs or denied the right to worship. Yet our Universal Declaration and my own country's guarantee of freedom of religion challenge all of us to live up to our own high principles — to allow people to practice faith freely, to respect different beliefs, to seek to understand even when we do not agree, and to speak out against those who, through words or actions, trample religious tolerance.

My job of public diplomacy is to reach out to the rest of the world and other peoples in a spirit of friendship and to respect and listen to the concerns and interests of others, and President Bush asked me to make encouraging interfaith dialogue part of my work. Faith is foundational in many people's lives, and world leaders would not be wise to ignore its power or to cede its discussion to extremists.

As I travel the world, it is often my privilege to meet people whose faith has called them to do great good. I have met Muslim American doctors who travelled to Pakistan to help care for victims of the earthquake there; Catholic nuns who helped families left homeless by mudslides in Central America; and volunteers from many nations whose good hearts led them to help fight AIDS and malaria in Africa and

build schools in Afghanistan. I know first-hand that there are people of good will in all faiths and cultures.

My country is known for the separation of church and State, meaning that the United States Government can neither impose religion nor restrict its practice. Yet I worry that people in other parts of the world sometimes mistake freedom of religion to mean freedom from religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. In America, people of many different faiths and those of no faith live side by side and try to respect each other's views. We are not perfect, and religion is sometimes a source of division, as is race, but respect for each other's diversity is our goal, and in the aftermath of 11 September, many Christian, Jewish and Muslim Americans reached out to try to better understand each other.

I have found that people of all faiths have much in common. As a Christian, my highest commandments are to love God and love my neighbour. My Muslim and Jewish friends tell me the same is true for them. While there are theological differences, ultimately I believe that the vast majority of people of every faith and culture want similar things for themselves and their families — education and health care, a safe neighbourhood, a good job — and most people want our lives to make a difference and to leave our world a little better. These are not dreams owned by any one nation or people, but shared human dreams. Despite differences of language or culture or skin colour, so much more unites us as human beings than divides us.

Yet, we live in a world where misunderstanding and mistrust are being inflamed by rhetoric of hate and acts of terror. And, as leaders from Malaysia and the Palestinian territories said in their addresses before the General Assembly this year, we must not leave the debate only to those who seek to pervert religion by using violence to pursue political agendas.

As I travel the world representing my country and listening to people of other countries, I find two major misperceptions. First, in many Muslim-majority nations, people worry that the war against terror is directed at them. I want to assure our friends across the world that this is not the case. Most Americans recognize that terrorists do not represent mainstream thinking and do not represent, but, instead, pervert all faiths with their barbaric acts. Many of America's own citizens have roots in the Arab world. Others come from virtually every culture and faith tradition. Islam is part of the West and part of America, and several million American Muslims live, work and worship freely in our country.

The second major misperception comes from my fellow Americans. I hear the complaint that Muslims do not speak out against terrorist violence. Yet that is not the case either. Many constructive voices speak out strongly. Afghanistan's President Karzai has condemned suicide bombing as contrary to Islam and says that terrorists cheat children by recruiting them. The Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference speaks out strongly against terrorist acts. Iraqi and Algerian citizens have denounced terrorists as murderers. Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a leader of the Sahwa reform movement, sent an open letter condemning Osama bin Laden for murdering innocents, saying, "This religion that protects the sanctity of blood, even that of the birds and animals, can never approve the killing of innocents whatever the reasons or motives might be". As the Sheikh's letter suggests, the time has come when good people of all faiths must join together to state clearly that killing oneself in order to kill others is wrong and a matter of shame, never honour.

There are many legitimate grievances in our world, but none can ever justify the targeting and murder of innocents. This has no place in a civilized world. We all have a role, and America wants to be a partner in encouraging dialogue. Through websites and communications alerts, we are working to highlight the many voices speaking out against terrorist violence and for greater interfaith understanding. We are encouraging interfaith dialogue and conversations between cultures.

Through a new programme called Citizen Dialogue, we have sent Muslim-American citizens across the world to engage with grass-roots citizens in Muslim communities. We brought international religious clerics here and sent American clerics abroad. We have sponsored summer programmes for young people, teaching respect for diversity. We have sent out musicians to promote tolerance and to show that differences can enrich rather than divide us.

We are dramatically expanding our two-way education and exchange programmes, bringing international visitors here and sending Americans abroad. I believe that there is no better way to build respect and understanding than to visit, study and work

in each other's countries. We have increased participation in these vital programmes from 27,000 people just a few years ago to more than 40,000 today, and we are hoping to increase it further, to more than 50,000.

We are also encouraging more Americans to travel and study overseas to experience the world's rich cultural and religious contributions, to learn more about other nations of the world. We have started a new language initiative, encouraging America's young people to study Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and other important world languages.

Today's gathering is a reminder that we are all part of an increasingly interconnected world that calls on each of us — no matter what our culture or faith community — to work for peace, life and hope. Each faith and culture has the responsibility of confirming to all that it respects other faiths and cultures. As we listen to and learn from one another, we are building a safer and more respectful world for the next generation.

This year, the world is celebrating the 800th anniversary of the birth of Rumi, the great Sufi poet, who wrote, "When someone asks what there is to do, light the candle in their hand". Through dialogue, we are lighting candles, and I hope this light will shine across the world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Viktar Gaisenak, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belarus.

Mr. Gaisenak (Belarus) (*spoke in Russian*): Religious intolerance, xenophobia and opposition of one culture to another today pose a real threat to peace and stability in our world. Accordingly, engaging in a dialogue among cultures and religions, based on mutual understanding, equality, mutual respect and tolerance, is a major challenge of our day.

The Republic of Belarus has repeatedly proclaimed its commitment to intensifying this kind of dialogue for peace. Proof of this is the initiative put forward by President Lukashenka at the 2005 World Summit (see A/60/PV.5) to recognize diversity of ways to progress in the development of States as a value of human civilization.

Respect for the *sui generis* nature of States and the right of peoples to follow their own path based on international dialogue is an essential condition for the maintenance of international peace and security. Dialogue among cultures and religions has to take place at all levels — national, regional and global. The Republic of Belarus and its Government are making the necessary effort to support this kind of dialogue at the national level. Our country is a multi-ethnic and multireligious State. Belarus has more than 140 ethnic groups, and more than 3,000 organizations reflecting 25 faiths and religious beliefs operate in Belarus.

The concern of the State to ensure the right of our citizens to enjoy the freedom of conscience and religion, as enshrined in the legislation of our Republic, is implemented in everyday life. The Government's programme for the development of cooperation with religions has been adopted and is being successfully carried out, as is cooperation with ethnic groups and our compatriots living abroad.

Belarus is taking concrete steps at the international level as well, including within the United Nations in order to support religious and cultural understanding. Our country was one of the first to accede to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The Republic of Belarus has traditionally been a sponsor of all draft resolutions adopted by the General Assembly that seek to encourage dialogue among civilizations and cultures.

In June 2007, our country participated in the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. The purpose of our participation in these initiatives is to support real steps to expanding interreligious and intercultural understanding and dialogue for peace.

Accordingly, we welcome the establishment in the Secretariat of a focal point for questions of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation. In addition, we believe it would be desirable to make better use of the information and communication technology mechanisms within the Secretariat, including United Nations Radio, as well as the resources of the specialized agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system, to promote the development of interfaith understanding and cooperation. We also welcome the productive steps taken towards the implementation of international initiatives within the United Nations to mutually enrich cultures and to make progress towards implementing

the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, in particular the appointment of the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

In the context of the item that we are now discussing, a truly remarkable international event took place in September this year: the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Countries held in Tehran. For the first time ever, the topic of cultural diversity and human rights was discussed within the context of the Non-Aligned Movement. That is a natural outcome of the development of the Movement, which does not endorse confrontation and defends every country's right to choose its own path of progressive development for the benefit of its population, without fear of the powerful of this world. The Movement is focusing on intercultural dialogue and cooperation because it is a key to achieving sustainable development and mutual understanding at all levels.

We believe that the Tehran Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity, which was adopted as the outcome of that meeting, and the decision to establish a Non-Aligned Movement Centre for Human Rights and Cultural Diversity are of great importance not only for the Movement but also for the international community as a whole. The Declaration, inter alia, calls upon the international community to maximize the benefits of globalization and cooperation to promote understanding and respect for cultural diversity. It emphasizes that it is only through broad and sustained efforts that we can create a shared future based on our common humanity and all its diversity. It indicates priority areas for such efforts, in particular education, the mass media, cultural and academic activities and cooperation within the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as activities by non-governmental organizations. The Movement's Ministers for Foreign Affairs also agreed that issues related to respect for human rights and cultural diversity must be taken into account in programmes in the main areas of the Movement's activities.

I assure the General Assembly that the Republic of Belarus will continue to participate actively in coordinated international efforts to achieve full mutual understanding among cultures and religions, in the service of peace and progress in our world.

The President: I now call on Her Excellency Ms. Helena Bambasova, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

Ms. Bambasova (Czech Republic): The Czech Republic aligns itself with the statement made earlier by the representative of Portugal on behalf of the European Union.

Over the centuries, the inhabitants of the territory of the Czech Republic, a country at the very centre of Europe, have witnessed the disastrous consequences of many periods of religious intolerance and of the failure to respect cultural diversity and diversity of opinion. Many people had to go into exile to preserve their beliefs and ideas, and we take pride in the fact that many of them took their ideals of peaceful cooperation and cultural tolerance along with them. Among others, Jan Amos Comenius and many of his Moravian brothers had to leave their country in search of more tolerant places.

When the Czechoslovak State first saw the light of day, in 1918, wide-reaching religious freedom, and freedom of faith and conscience were constitutionally guaranteed. That paved the way for interreligious dialogue and for an equal partnership between religion and a democratic State based on civil society. After the fall of communism, our society once again opened up to the outside world, and we began to learn new lessons about accepting cultural and religious differences as a value rather than a threat.

Nearly 60 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights became an inspiration for all societies. Following the tragic events of the Second World War, and with the painful memory of suffering still vivid, nations demonstrated a strong commitment not to allow a repetition of such tragedies. The spirit and the text of the Declaration — which is neither long nor complicated — reflect the best ingredients for peace: tolerance, respect for diversity and the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Indeed, today, 60 years later, there is no better solution: using these three avenues is the best way to reduce tension, to explain misunderstandings and to come to the realization that the values of humanity unite us in all our differences, which enrich our shared existence.

If we are to be tolerant in our words and deeds and to appreciate the differences of others, we have to know ourselves, and we have to understand our differences. For that, we need dialogue. Where there is

no genuine and open dialogue across religious and cultural lines, there is space for prejudice. Only dialogue facilitates mutual understanding, which prevents violence and plays an important role in the maintenance of peace and the prevention of conflict. As the UNESCO Constitution states, "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

In order to lead a genuine dialogue, one must come to it with an open mind and listen to others. To create the conditions for a free, spontaneous and fruitful dialogue that reflects the variety of opinions in a society, we must ensure freedom of expression, pluralism and free participation by civil society and the public.

We need to learn about all cultures and religions. Indeed, we need to learn the art of leading a dialogue. Education for tolerance must not be limited to school education. In our efforts, we should include all of society, not only young people, although their role in crossing traditional borders and in being willing to accept the value of differences cannot be underestimated. We must further include journalists, teachers and all members of the public.

In supporting dialogue, cooperation, tolerance and education, the United Nations has played and must continue to play a crucial and instrumental role. Tolerance is one of the key principles on which the United Nations was founded in its struggle for a peaceful future. The closer we come together in our globalized world, the more important our understanding and our capacity for intercultural and interreligious dialogue will become.

For that reason, we were pleased to participate in the informal thematic debate on "Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities", held during the sixty-first session of the General Assembly. We would like to commend the President of the Assembly at its sixty-first session, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa, for organizing that event, which was in the right direction, as it encouraged genuine dialogue.

We would like to pay special tribute to the work of the Alliance of Civilizations and to take this opportunity to express our full support for Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, and for his efforts. We also fully support the activities of UNESCO. We participate actively in those and other valuable projects and programmes. We welcome opportunities to learn more about others, and we are prepared to support genuine dialogue in all bodies of the United Nations.

Once we have succeeded in learning how to lead an open, friendly and genuine dialogue among our cultures and religions and to promote the principles of tolerance, non-discrimination, respect and protection of the human rights of every individual in our societies, we will be on the way to achieving the goals enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

In conclusion, let me assure the Assembly that the Czech Republic is prepared to contribute actively to the achievement of our common goal of promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

The President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Lyubomir Kyuchukov, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria.

Mr. Kyuchukov (Bulgaria). On behalf of the Bulgarian Government, I commend the convening of today's High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I will try to be very concrete, practical and pragmatic.

Bulgaria's historical experience is one of tolerance among its citizens, irrespective of their religious denomination and cultural heritage. My country is at the crossroads between Christianity and Islam. Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, Roma, Armenians and other ethnic groups form the modern Bulgarian nation and are proud that ethnic and religious tolerance has always prevailed and that Bulgaria was one of the two European States where, even in the most turbulent historical moments — such as the Second World War — Jews were saved from deportation by their fellow countrymen.

In recent times, Bulgaria has embodied the model of transition that is characterized by preserving ethnic and religious peace. Everyone can understand what that means when we look at the map of South-East Europe and the western Balkans in post-Yugoslavia times. That is not to say that we feel immune, yet tolerance remains predominant at the societal level — a genuine characteristic of the national mentality.

That is why we supported and will consistently continue to support the Alliance of Civilizations. I take this opportunity to extend congratulations to the High

Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, President Jorge Sampaio, and to wish him success, in which we all have a stake and to which we can all contribute. As a member of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends, Bulgaria is currently developing its national action plan.

The success of the noble endeavour of intercultural dialogue depends to a great extent on the interaction between the United Nations and relevant regional organizations. The European Union, in partnership with the United Nations and on its own, is a factor for the promotion of interfaith and intercultural understanding. Bulgaria strongly supports the ongoing initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation, such as the Euromed Barcelona process, with its Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, the Black Sea Synergy, and the European Union Strategy on Central Asia. Bulgaria joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Forum and intends to participate in the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue.

We also welcome the declaration of 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, meant, inter alia, to bring about a better integration of minority groups and faith-based communities, in particular Muslim communities in non-Muslim environments. I should like to refer to a specific example.

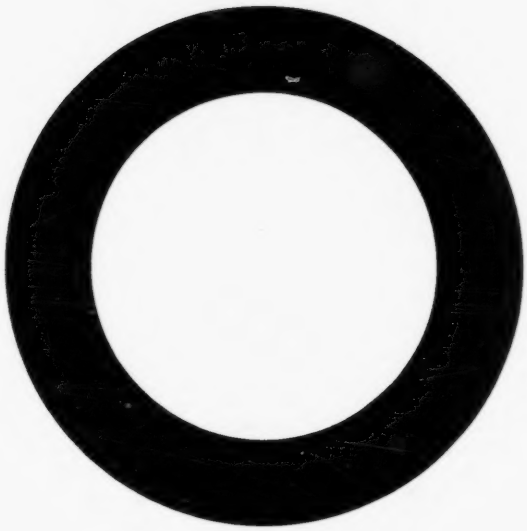
Like elsewhere in Europe, in Bulgaria the Government and civil society attribute great importance to the integration of the Roma population. Ample proof of such joint action was the Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative. Conceived by the United Nations Development Programme, it was supported by nine Governments from Central and South-East Europe. It marked the first attempt on an international scale at joint action aimed at improving the lives of the Roma in Europe. The Decade was officially announced in 2005 in Sofia. In the course of the Bulgarian presidency of the Decade, the first monitoring report was prepared by Roma civil society organizations and released in Sofia in June this year.

The region of South-East Europe represents a crossroads of cultural and religious diversity. The Bulgarian chairmanship-in-office of the South-East European Cooperation Process is an opportunity for us to contribute in an even more active manner to the consolidation of stability, because intercultural, interethnic and interfaith dialogue in our region means nothing less than peace, stability and security.

Guided by such an approach, we launched and helped to materialize concrete steps to enhance direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina at the level of ministers of culture, leading to the restoration and preservation of cultural and religious monuments in Kosovo. In 2003, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov, launched the idea of a joint project on cultural corridors in South-East Europe, intended to promote, together with UNESCO, the centuries-old connections between the peoples of the region that today form the basis for better regional cooperation and development. Several regional forums traced a road map to a new kind of attitude and interpretation of the rich cultural heritage of the region.

We therefore firmly support international efforts, including the unique role of the United Nations, to promote development, peace and security through international cooperation and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Today's forum could make a difference if it helps us get closer to a consensus in that respect.

The meeting rose at 1.20 p.m.



United Nations A/62/PV.18

General Assembly

Sixty-second session

Official Records

18th plenary meeting
Friday, 5 October 2007, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 7 (*continued*)

Organization of work, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items

Letter dated 4 October 2007 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to the President of the General Assembly (A/62/338/Add.1)

The President: Before giving floor to the first speaker, I would like to invite the attention of the General Assembly to document A/62/338/Add.1, containing a letter dated 4 October 2007 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to the President of the General Assembly.

Members are aware that, pursuant to section I, paragraph 7, of Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly should be permitted to meet at United Nations Headquarters during the main part of the regular session of the Assembly unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly.

Members will recall that, at its 1st plenary meeting of the sixty-second session, held on 18 September 2007, the General Assembly authorized a number of subsidiary organs to meet during the main part of the regular session of the Assembly.

Authorization is now sought for the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund to hold one meeting during the main part of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, on the strict understanding that the meeting would be accommodated within available facilities and services.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to authorize the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund to hold one meeting during the main part of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly?

It was so decided.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Agenda item 49 (*continued*)

Culture of peace

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/62/97 and A/62/337)

The President: I give the floor to Mr. H.E. Seif Ali Iddi, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania.

Mr. Iddi (United Republic of Tanzania): The Government of the United Republic of Tanzania is pleased to participate in this dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation. This meeting has come at an opportune time, when we need to encourage new thinking and dialogue on making the world more peaceful by building bridges among interfaith and

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multicultural institutions and by strengthening shared similarities among different faiths.

We thank the Secretary-General for his informative reports on this agenda item. We welcome the civil society hearing, as we believe that the civil society is a key partner in our resolve to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace.

The importance of dialogue and tolerance between religions and cultures to achieve peace in this globalized world cannot be overemphasized at a time when there are extremists bent on exploiting cultural and religious differences. We are thus encouraged that various initiatives are being undertaken by various organizations to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation. Furthermore we commend the efforts undertaken by the United Nations system and in particular the leading role provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation in their programmes. The United Nations should use its strategic convening advantage to lead the world in this endeavour.

The Government of the United Republic of Tanzania acknowledges the initiatives of the Governments of Spain and Turkey in the formation of the Alliance of Civilizations. We congratulate Mr. Jorge Sampaio on his appointment as the High Representative for the Alliance.

We support the Alliance of Civilizations as a credible and viable attempt to diminish the dangerous tensions between diverse societies and their threat to international stability. The recommendations contained in the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations warrant our serious consideration. We look forward to receiving the report on the work of the Alliance as well as to its first international forum, to be held in Spain in 2008.

In Tanzania interreligious and intercultural cooperation is integrally woven into the social fabric of our nation. Tanzania is home to different races, more than 100 ethnic groups and several religions which coexist in harmony, with full freedom to express their cultural and religious diversity. Long before our independence, in 1961 for Tanzania Mainland and in 1964 for Zanzibar, our founding fathers of the independence movement deliberately focused on national unity by highlighting the assets of unity, such as a common language.

After independence, there have been conscious efforts to nurture unity in diversity through innovative national policies that promote and encourage a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among our people. Several measures were taken by the Government in that regard. The most effective measure to address and dampen the politicization of religious and other identities included policies that promoted the principle of equity, particularly through access to education.

The institutions responsible for administering justice were also reformed to ensure that they accommodated the needs and aspirations of diverse groups. Furthermore, legal provisions were instituted forbidding the formation of organizations, such as political parties, that foment and amplify divisions based on race, religion or tribe. That separation of religion, race and ethnicity from politics has enabled Tanzania to have peacefully held four presidential elections.

The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania pronounces Tanzania a secular State. The Constitution further provides for the right of every citizen to exercise the freedom of worship and to join or leave any religion of their choice. Moreover, religious tolerance is emphasized. Our penal code does not allow behaviour that is injurious to religious liberty. It should be underscored that the Government of Tanzania greatly values freedom of expression, but that freedom should be exercised with respect for other religions and cultures.

The Government has also undertaken measures to build a culture of peace and unity. That has been accomplished through many avenues, such as media messages, school curricula and our national unifying symbols and heritage, including our national heroes and youth movements. The Government has further encouraged and assisted religious organizations in holding dialogues amongst themselves. To this end, Muslim and Christian leaders in Tanzania have formed a joint Commission on Peace, Development and Reconciliation. It is a forum for dialogue and has contributed to engendering understanding and accommodation.

In addition, religious leaders and organizations have worked hand-in-hand with the Government in

combating social problems that could be avenues for disenchantment and thus provide recruiting grounds for radical fringe elements in society, sowing seeds of misunderstanding and discord in society. We should not underestimate the capacity of those elements to develop divisive ideologies to incite and exploit social deprivation, poverty and religious differences in order to advocate violence. Those people and groups transcend national and international boundaries. We must endeavour to address the root causes of frustrations that could be the breeding ground for racial politics and ideologies in the name of religion.

Religious intolerance is fuelled by ignorance of what other faiths stand for. It is that ignorance that is exploited by those who have an agenda seeking to advance political goals through violence justified on religious grounds. Therefore, increased education and communication aimed at promoting better understanding and tolerance should be accorded a high priority by all of us.

Concerted efforts from all of us are needed as we deal with religiously motivated political violence and terrorism. The Government of Tanzania reiterates its readiness to share our national experience in order to further this dialogue, with a view to promoting understanding and tolerance among diverse cultures and religions in order to contribute towards world peace and security.

The President: I now call on H.E. Mr. Anton Niculescu, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Romania.

Mr. Niculescu (Romania): I am deeply honoured to address the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I would like to begin by thanking the President of the General Assembly for organizing this Dialogue on one of the most important issues of our time.

Romania fully endorses the statement of the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, which was made yesterday.

In an increasingly globalized world, where we live together and interact with each other, intercultural dialogue will be a permanent process requiring worldwide participation at all levels. We must put intercultural and interreligious dialogue at the top of our political agenda, because no progress is possible without joint responsibility and a sharing of the task by all. We welcome foremost the interactive hearing involving representatives of civil society as an important part of our debate.

The rich cultural diversity of my country could not have been better illustrated than by the logo chosen for the city of Sibiu, which, along with Luxemburg, is the 2007 European Capital of Culture: "Sibiu — City of Culture — City of Cultures". The geographical position of Romania at the crossroads of Central and South-Eastern European cultures is reflected in both the variety and the richness of our cultural diversity. The social landscape is characterized by a variety of cultural traditions, including Hungarian, Roma, German, Ukrainian, Jewish, Turkish, Tartar, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Greek, Polish, Italian, Armenian and Croatian.

Romania is also a place of peaceful coexistence between different religions and confessions: Orthodox, Roman and Greek Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim and others. The churches and religious communities contribute to better harmony among people by promoting mutual respect within the framework of shared fundamental values. The Romanian Government is working closely with religious communities in promoting interreligious dialogue.

In this context, in September 2007, Romania hosted the Third European Ecumenical Assembly for the first time in a largely Orthodox country. The Assembly gathered a large number of representatives, not only from European institutions, countries and churches, but also representatives of Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe, as well as from churches in America, Asia and Africa. The Assembly's message, adopted in Sibiu, encourages peaceful dialogue between religions, better knowledge of all religions, and respect for freedom of religion, human dignity and human rights.

Romania welcomes the Alliance of Civilizations and expresses its full support and willingness to be associated with its activities, for we think the Alliance has great potential to promote peace by means of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. We are fully satisfied with the conclusions of the first ministerial meeting of the group of friends, which took place last week, and we consider the Alliance ready to make a major step forward in achieving tangible results.

As the Presidency of the European Union stated earlier, we think that Europe, along with other regions

of the world, could play a key role in reaching the objectives of the Alliance of Civilizations. History has shaped Europe as a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious continent. However, today's new realities, including migration and globalization, will enrich its physiognomy even more.

Romania, now at a happy turning point in its history, is changing even faster and becoming more urban, more open, deeply democratic and more multicultural. Thus, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, to be organized by the European Union next year, represents a great opportunity for my country to deal with the more complex cultural environment and to acquire new intercultural dialoguing skills through contacts with other European countries and neighbouring regions. Yet, in my opinion, one of the most important results of the European Year will be the understanding of our unity in diversity and the awareness that different cultures, religions and beliefs are bound to enrich our lives and reflect the same universal values.

In that regard, Romania has already prepared a national strategy for intercultural dialogue with a special focus on the involvement of civil society, especially young people and children. Romania has also participated in the project of the Council of Europe, working on its white paper on intercultural dialogue, which seeks to develop a coherent policy aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue within Europe and with its neighbours.

I would like to refer to my own region, the Black Sea region, a distinct geographical area strategically located at the intersection of Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. This area, characterized by countries with very different histories and cultures, has many opportunities, but also faces challenges and difficulties that require a comprehensive response. In our view, given the confluence of cultures in the Black Sea area, intercultural and interreligious dialogue could play an increasingly important role in advancing regional cooperation and in solving some of the regional difficulties.

Therefore, we consider that international initiatives in the field of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, including those carried out under the aegis of the United Nations, can be beneficial. In this context, we intend to propose a project aiming to promote the intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the Black Sea region, which could be developed in cooperation with the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the heads of States from the South-East Europe region in Bucharest on 7 June 2007 describes multiculturalism as not only a multitude of cultures with equal status, but also a system based on common values and the development of peace, and interculturality as the constant interaction between cultures in the spirit of building bridges among peoples.

I hope that our debate will contribute to strengthening our commitment for peace, and that other similar initiatives will follow aimed at broadening our intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Hans Winkler, State Secretary for European and International Affairs of Austria.

Mr. Winkler (Austria): Austria fully supports the statement by the Presidency of the European Union but would like to add a few thoughts.

The existence of intolerance, racism and other forms of discrimination is an undeniable fact. Such phenomena exist in all our countries and increasingly so. The news we encounter almost every day is most alarming: immigrants or asylum seekers are being harassed or attacked; debates about publications that are offensive to some, while others insist on the principle of freedom of expression, get out of hand and sometimes even lead to outbursts of violence. Religious symbols are becoming a matter of contention. In short, interreligious and intercultural relations within societies and beyond national borders are becoming strained.

The disquieting truth is that all of this is happening despite the laudable efforts of many well-established organizations and institutions that work to combat various forms of intolerance, despite numerous studies, reports and despite a seemingly endless number of resolutions and action plans.

Must we then throw up our hands and, discouraged, admit defeat, discontinue our efforts and accept the state of affairs as it is? The answer is obvious: of course not! We must not leave the field to those who sow discord and preach hate and intolerance. By giving up our fight against intolerance

and bigotry, we would leave those who want to destroy our values victorious.

Today we have the chance and the duty to learn from the mistakes and omissions of the past. Whether religiously, racially or economically motivated, whether in the East, West, North or South, we must stand up against all forms of extremism and the abuse of religious convictions and cultural traditions.

Dialogue is the indispensable fabric that holds each democratic society together and is the prerequisite for the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions. Dialogue communicates what unites us but also what irritates us.

Austria is committed to protecting and promoting cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Each country has special challenges to meet. While the problems are global, the answers must be made to fit the particular situations in each country.

We in Austria have a longstanding tradition as a platform for meaningful dialogue between religions and civilizations, in particular between Christianity and Islam. We will continue to remain engaged, because we know that we are not immune against the challenges that many countries in Europe and elsewhere are facing today.

We believe that the United Nations is the best framework to promote such a dialogue on a global scale by setting standards, including legal standards, and by being the vanguard in the protection of human rights. States bear a large share of the responsibility to fight intolerance and discrimination. It is incumbent upon them to create the legal and institutional framework in which discrimination can be prevented or, if need be, in which transgressions will ultimately be prosecuted and punished by independent courts. By the same token, political leadership is required to ensure the necessary political, social and economic framework where free citizens can exercise their rights and are protected against violence and aggression.

The State cannot, however, shoulder this responsibility alone. Civil society plays an important part, and religious leaders have to assume a special responsibility, as was underlined very eloquently yesterday by Minister Alkalaj of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by others. The fundamental values inherent in all world religions clearly mandate all such leaders to explicitly reject the preaching of hate and incitement to violence. Radicalization, disguised in religious terms, seems to take place in a kind of "identity vacuum", where young people who lack social or economic perspectives struggle with their own identity.

It is easy to produce clichés and misrepresent what is foreign. Mutual trust, on the other hand, is much more difficult to achieve. Nobody is born a terrorist or an extremist and that is true for all religions and ideologies. Education is the key to reaching out to the hearts and minds of young people. Access to knowledge and information and clear perspectives are the driving force for change in society and for a peaceful and secure coexistence of all citizens.

Like many countries, we have tried to find our own answers by learning from the best practices of others. For instance, a number of steps have been taken to promote dialogue with Islam. University master's degree programmes on Islamic religious pedagogy, the establishment of faculties of Islamic theology, as well as imam training programmes at European universities and teacher training colleges are just some examples which might facilitate a fruitful dialogue.

Dialogue also needs structure and continuity. Returning to the example of my own country, the Austrian Government, together with the Islamic community in Austria, recently initiated and supported a conference of European imams in Vienna. The declaration adopted on that occasion clearly states the necessity of developing a Muslim-European identity and leaves no doubt as to the compatibility of Islam, democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms. The declaration also addresses gender issues and states, inter alia, that any kind of violation of women's rights should be strongly censured: forced marriage, genital mutilation, honour killings and violence within the family have no foundation in Islam.

It is clear that women, and this is true of all societies, have an important role to play in this dialogue, both in community work and in politics in general, including in international peace processes. In May of this year, Ms. Ursula Plassnik, the Austrian Foreign Minister, hosted a conference of women leaders networking for peace and security in the Middle East with a number of eminent persons from different countries in the region. The clear message from this conference was that women are ready to reach out to each other across national, ethnic and

religious barriers and to engage in constructive dialogue.

We have no time to lose. Otherwise we risk seeing our societies taken hostage by extremists on all sides. The success or failure of our efforts today will determine the future of our children.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Aly Maher Elsayed, Special Representative of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Egypt.

Mr. Elsayed (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me great pleasure to represent the Arab Republic of Egypt in this High-level Dialogue. I would like to say at the outset that holding this dialogue in the United Nations is essential to the realization of much-desired peace in the world.

While religions may differ in some aspects of doctrine, they undoubtedly share common values and principles regarding respect for human beings and human dignity and life. In essence, they reject violence and war. Therefore, dialogue should begin by addressing these common values, not matters of rapprochement or integration of faiths. What we really need is understanding and rapprochement between people in different communities.

We are all aware that the phrase used to greet people in Islam, the religion of tolerance, is "al-salaamu alaikum" ("peace be upon you"). The word "peace" is in itself one of God's Holy Names. Moreover, the teachings of Christianity revere the meaning of peace and call for its reign on earth, while "shalom", the Hebrew word for "peace", is used to greet people in Judaism.

Hence, those who attempt to exploit religions and cultures to justify violence are in fact undermining such religions and their lofty messages. Dialogue alone can build bridges between peoples, regardless of differences of belief and conception. It also allows for learning about the other, both within groups and as individuals, and for the understanding and acceptance of the other. Individuals are usually wary of what they do not know and fear what they do not understand. Dialogue, accordingly, is the appropriate approach for learning, understanding, rapprochement and cooperation for the attainment of common goals, particularly in the twenty-first century, the era of globalization, where no culture can afford to become isolationist or to avoid interaction with other cultures.

Peace is not merely a philosophy or a lofty principle. It is a way of life and constitutes civilized conduct for the good of humankind. It is therefore imperative that we all commit ourselves to the foundations of peace, which are inseparable from respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

Respect for cultural identities is the point of departure for the successful conclusion of our dialogue, as it will generate acceptance by all for interaction that encourages mutual understanding, spreading the spirit of tolerance and utilizing the capabilities of new information technology to disseminate knowledge and correct stereotypes and misconceptions.

Our human civilization and common heritage rest on the valuable contributions of all civilizations and cultures. I recall here the great role of Muslim scientists, philosophers and writers, among them, for example, al-Khawarizmi, al-Razi, al-Farabi, Alhazen, and Ibn Khaldun, to mention only a few. Regrettably, some seek to identify Islam with extremism, violence and terrorism, while Islam is innocent of all these allegations.

The preamble to the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization declares that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Dialogue is the best way of achieving that goal.

I would also like to add that this dialogue is not the concern of Governments or religious leaders alone. It is, rather, the concern of each and every individual in our societies, all non-governmental organizations, all thinkers and writers, and all who are truly concerned about the future of mankind. The most perilous challenge to international peace and security is the proliferation of violence and the use of force as a means of expression, especially in light of the inability and failure of the international community — and I apologize for saying this — as represented in the United Nations, to settle chronic political and economic problems. Such failures breed feelings of injustice, oppression and double standards and promote competitiveness over materialistic and political gains.

These are all catalysts for conflict, not for dialogue, and require us to double our efforts within

this Organization to settle these conflicts and assist developing countries in realizing the legitimate aspirations of their peoples for development and prosperity, without attached conditions, and within an international framework characterized by democracy and equality, free from politicization and selectivity. Indeed, only through collective action and dialogue can we achieve the desired results.

In recent years a number of bodies and conferences have addressed the issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. That in itself is a positive element, provided that we coordinate the various initiatives, so that they work in tandem and do not compete or work at cross purposes.

In Egypt, we are currently preparing for the meetings and workshops of next year's Dialogue Among Peoples and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Gulf, to be held in Alexandria. The Institute for Peace Studies, chaired by Her Excellency Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, was designated to organize this third gathering, following the first such event, held in Paris under the patronage of former President Jacques Chirac, and the second, held in Seville, Spain.

This dialogue should translate our common endeavour to promote tolerance, respect for religions and beliefs and cultural diversity into a concrete plan of action and practical and viable programmes. We have high hopes that the General Assembly Dialogue will result in concerted action aimed at mutual understanding, bridging gaps and the acceptance of the other. In this regard, Egypt is fully ready to contribute to and participate in this process.

The President: I call next on His Excellency Mr. Fedja Starčević, Assistant Minister for Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia.

Mr. Starčević (Serbia): In a world where no country is perfectly homogeneous, calls for the recognition of different ethnic, religious and language groups and values have increased. What is needed is to develop a sense of respect for the other, which would serve as a basis for mutual respect, understanding and knowledge. UNESCO calls it "tolerance", even though that word does not seem to include all the necessary ingredients. Yet, the practical understanding of tolerance does indeed include this sense of respect that we seek to increase.

There is potentially no greater agent of tolerance than religion. All religions preach morality, civility, kindness, compassion, love, tolerance and peace. So prominent is the teaching of universal love among all religions that it could be taken as a common goal of them all. Yet, religion has been often misused in the cause of division, discrimination and death. It is sometimes turned from a personal matter of faith and sustenance into a weapon of power and coercion. From war to discrimination and other violations of human rights, what we see all too frequently is a lack of tolerance and understanding between religious traditions.

But one thing should be clear: religions themselves are not to blame. The problem is usually not with the faith, but with the faithful. Each religion is a path towards the same goal of salvation, and therefore each religion must be given utmost respect. No one religion can claim monopoly and say that it is the only way to the truth. All great religions are equal streams of civilized human coexistence, parallel depositories of spiritual wisdom and complementary sources of social guidance. All must therefore learn to give due respect to each other and to each other's view of human life. The key to this is to foster knowledge, understanding and profound respect for all the world's spiritual traditions.

Diversity of religious and cultural heritage is, at the same time, a characteristic of one's identity and a means of reconciliation. The latter is particularly relevant for South-Eastern Europe, which experienced ethnic and civil wars and devastation at the end of the twentieth century.

People in our region, the Balkans, have throughout history faced many confrontations of civilizations: mighty empires vied with each other for supremacy over our territories. And those conflicts often had a religious dimension as well. As a result, this created an ambivalent cultural, psychological and political legacy, where people of other customs and faiths were looked at with both mistrust and fear. However, there followed a long period in the former Yugoslavia when coexistence and tolerance were fostered. Yugoslav nations, divided between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism, learned to live side by side and created a new political and cultural identity for themselves.

The harmony thus created was destroyed by the surge of nationalism in the 1990s. However, the peoples and the new States that emerged in the territory that was Yugoslavia, following normalization of relations among them, have all turned to the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights, and they have jointly committed themselves to reconciliation, cooperation and European integration.

For the Republic of Serbia, as a multi-ethnic and multireligious society, such an orientation is of paramount importance. Our constitution and our laws guarantee equality on ethnic, religious or every other ground. Religious communities carry out their activities in Serbia in full freedom. Religious affiliation is a private matter for every individual and belongs to the body of individual human rights.

In cooperation with other countries of the Western Balkans and of South-Eastern Europe, with the support and assistance of European and international organizations, Serbia has made considerable efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation in our region, with a view to strengthening peace, cooperation and stability. Encouraging results have been achieved, so much so that the Balkans is increasingly viewed as a region of fruitful cooperation instead of conflict, as in the past.

An important role in this regard has been played by both governmental institutions and civil society. UNESCO initiated the first Summit of heads of State of the South-East Europe region, which was held in Ohrid, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in 2003. That was the first time that all heads of State of the region had gathered together since the outbreak of conflicts in the Balkans.

Since then, South-East Europe Summits are held every year. The declaration adopted at the last South-East Europe Summit, in Bucharest in June 2007, is an expression of the efforts of the countries and peoples of the region to develop cooperation in the field of culture in order to promote cultural diversity and knowledge of one another as a bridge between cultural heritage and the culture of the future.

However, the current developments related to Serbia's southern province of Kosovo are in stark contrast to this constructive atmosphere of tolerance, dialogue, cooperation and interaction in the region. For the last eight years, Kosovo, under the administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, has been the single region in Europe where the enjoyment of basic human rights has not been possible, as a result of the lack of security, freedom of movement and work for the Serbian community. Serbian homes and churches have been demolished and acts of violence against Serbs and other non-Albanians have been committed. Their continuous existence in Kosovo has thus been put in jeopardy.

In May 2005, UNESCO organized an international donors conference in Paris to protect and restore cultural heritage in Kosovo. An inventory has been made of 48 Orthodox, 14 Muslim and 13 secular heritage sites to be protected and to be restored to their former glory. Kosovo today is a region where these and similar activities, as well as all other possible measures to overcome fear and suspicion and increase confidence and cooperation among different communities are most needed. Achieving positive results in such activities would greatly improve the quality of life for all in Kosovo and would make the achievement of a constructive political solution more possible than is now the case. Serbia is ready and willing to engage in such pursuits, guided by the desire to contribute to making all parts of the Balkan region a zone of friendship and cooperation. We hope and believe that our common future lies in that direction.

Allow me to say in conclusion that Serbia will continue to support all activities aimed at interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the interest of peace and understanding in the world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Pjer Šimunović, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia.

Mr. Šimunović (Croatia): I am honoured to address this meeting today, as it is further adding to the political importance that Member States and international organizations attach to the fundamentally important topic of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. I would also like to thank you, Mr. President, for providing us with this opportunity to share and advance our reflections and learn from each other's experiences.

Croatia has been situated at the crossroads of different cultures and religions for centuries. Today, it is still where Central and Eastern Europe meet the Mediterranean and where Christianity meets Islam, providing a rich cultural and religious diversity.

Croatia is fully committed to combating intolerance and discrimination and to promoting mutual respect and understanding. At the national level, Croatia recognizes and protects freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right, as stated in the constitution. We are proud to say that there are 42 registered religious groups in Croatia, of which 14 enjoy direct annual financial support for their work from the Government. All religious groups are independent of the State.

Each State has an obligation to protect freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee to all religious communities the freedom to gather in places of worship. However, we must remember that a great part of responsibility for promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding also lies in the hands of religious leaders. It is their moral duty to spread the message of peace and cooperation with members of other religions in order to create a common future and society. Education, tolerance and respect for fellow human beings are means of creating a peaceful world. That goal requires joint efforts at all levels — from the international and national levels down to the level of every single person.

Croatia welcomes and follows with great interest the increased attention to the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding by Governments, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, religious communities and civil society. Only through such partnerships can we find effective solutions.

In that respect, allow me to welcome the work of the Alliance of Civilizations and the appointment by the Secretary-General of the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, His Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio, earlier this year.

As a candidate for membership in the European Union, Croatia aligns itself with the statement delivered by Portugal on behalf of the European Union. Croatia welcomes and supports the recent decision by the European Union to declare 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Croatia is also following with great interest the work done through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Defending the freedom of religion and belief, as well as cultural diversity, lies at the core of peace, justice and, consequently, security. As a candidate for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for 2008-2009, the Republic of Croatia is very well aware of that sensitive interdependence and stands ready to work with other members for a peaceful, tolerant and considerate world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Fahd Bin Abdulrahman Alrajeh, Capital Minister for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Alrajeh (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): First, we would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your election as President of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session. We are confident that you will discharge your tasks with wisdom and skill. Also, we thank those who called for and organized this important meeting.

We would like to contribute some ideas and encouragement on the subject of dialogue, which has its foundations in the Millennium Declaration of 2000 (resolution 55/2). There, tolerance was defined as an essential value for international relations in the twenty-first century and as a contribution to a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations. Throughout history, dialogue per se has never been controversial; cultures made use of it among themselves, and in that way humanity gained stable values to which we all aspire, such as tolerance, coexistence, cooperation, the rejection of violence, hatred, discord, tension and vengeance and the nurturing of peace.

Sadly, we have been late to submit this subject to public debate, and it has been overtaken by developments in human civilization: interests have become interdependent and the rights and duties of peoples and nations have become enshrined in law. Still, to speak about dialogue now is certainly better than further delay. Clearly, talk of a "clash of civilizations" is in response to those who promote terrorism, but it constitutes support for their schemes, especially when they exploit religion for their evil purposes and in furtherance of economic and political interests. To achieve a decisive victory over terrorism we must successfully undermine extremist thinking that rejects dialogue and coexistence.

It is also essential that we adopt international legislation calling for respect for religions and criminalizing attacks on religious symbols. Saudi Arabia also warns of exploitation of the counter-terrorism campaign by the forces of extremism and the advocates of a clash among cultures and civilizations in order to divert the fight against terrorism from its

course and its objectives. Here, it is important to stress that no religion calls for terrorism; all religions call for noble values. It is not right to denounce a religion for the offences of some extremists.

The media bear an important responsibility to disseminate correct ideas about other people while avoiding stereotype, cliché, misconception and prejudgement. This can help bring about a successful dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Allow me to recall here that throughout history the peoples of the Middle East have always built cultural bridges of contact and communication among civilizations. Those countries have played a noble role in calling for the convening of many conferences at all levels in order to strengthen the ideals of cooperation and tolerance among civilizations.

At the national level, and convinced of the importance of interaction with a world of many cultures and civilizations, of a culture of peace and of finding common ground for cooperation among civilizations, Saudi Arabia has called for a dialogue among civilizations in which all Muslim States would participate.

The General Assembly consequently adopted resolution 53/42 on 14 January 1998, proclaiming the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. That has made it possible to shed light on the tolerant face of Islam and to create a culture of peace and cooperation among peoples of the world.

Our King, the Servant of the Two Holy Places, has often stressed the importance of dialogue among civilizations, peaceful coexistence and of establishing lines of communication between peoples, as opposed to the idea of confrontation and the clash of civilizations. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is continuing its efforts in this area by participating in national, regional and international initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations and the Panel of the Wise. We also supported the holding of the International Forum for a Culture of Peace and Dialogue among Civilizations in the Third Millennium and have established a multidisciplinary group of Saudi specialists to engage in dialogue with our foreign partners at the annual National Festival of Heritage and Culture. We also support other initiatives on dialogue among civilizations and the culture of peace, including websites and stamps, that promote and enhance the importance of dialogue among civilizations.

I now turn to the issue of religious and cultural tolerance. My country hosts more than 7 million foreigners of different religions and ethnicities, from more than 70 countries, who enjoy full rights and live in dignity. While differences of position are a natural result of diversity — even within a particular religion or culture — they should not lead to confrontations or clashes with that religion or culture. On the contrary, we must find common ground for coexistence and cooperation, which humankind has managed to do throughout the ages. We are confident that our project on cultures and civilizations will succeed, thanks to the efforts of the Panel of the Wise, and that we will begin a constructive and purposeful dialogue to consolidate these values, which will enable everyone to benefit from peace and prosperity. If we achieve that, the critics of this movement will not be able to ignore it. If we are optimistic, the future will smile upon us.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Spreading a culture of peace and tolerance is a global effort in which everyone must participate if we are to create a peaceful environment that will enable future generations to achieve progress, prosperity and cooperation.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I call next on His Excellency Mr. Art Jacobi, Director for Human Rights and Good Governance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Mr. Jacobi (Netherlands): In addition to the intervention made yesterday by the presidency of the European Union, with which my delegation fully aligns itself, I would like to make a few observations from a more national perspective.

The Netherlands has a long-standing record in the field of the international protection of freedom of religion and belief. For instance, the Netherlands played an important role during the negotiations on the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (resolution 36/55). Its article 8 consists of the so-called Dutch clause, which states,

> "Nothing in the present Declaration shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights."

That principle remains as important today as it was 25 years ago. It also applies to the subject of our meeting: interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. The Netherlands Government fully supports the underlying idea that a global understanding of our cultural, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds is more essential than ever, especially because the world has become a global village. What happens in one part of the world affects other parts of the world: tensions among various groups in our societies do not remain unnoticed abroad. Hence, dialogue among all and at all levels — local, national, regional and international — is a useful instrument for promoting understanding and for reducing such tensions.

At the same time, whatever we do remains subject to the aforementioned Dutch clause: our international human rights system provides the umbrella under which dialogue becomes possible, and it provides the firm and fertile soil upon we can build and grow.

As the Prime Minister of the Netherlands stated in his address to the General Assembly last week (see A/62/PV.8), values connect us across our cultures and religions. We must not allow cultural or religious differences to create barriers to open dialogue. The Netherlands wants to join forces with all those who want to promote tolerance and dialogue among civilizations. But we must not allow such dialogue to call into question the universal validity of our common values.

Against that background, the Netherlands Government has supported and will continue to support a wide range of initiatives. In 2006, we contributed to the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1981 United Nations Declaration, held in Prague. On that occasion, all participants underlined the importance of that instrument as a basis for further interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In June 2008, the Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue will be held in Amsterdam. That meeting, which the Netherlands organizes together with Thailand, will not be confined to discussions among participants. Our capital city, Amsterdam, is actively involved, and participants will be invited to visit a number of grass-roots activities in Amsterdam, which is, as members may be aware, home to 177 nationalities and to citizens who are from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

That reflects a second principle, which we cherish when we speak about dialogue. Events — such as today's — that bring together representatives of Governments are, of course, important, but real dialogue can be successful only if it includes our citizens. I am therefore very pleased at the presence, today and yesterday, of so many representatives of civil society and at the opportunity to interact with them during the panel discussions. Non-governmental organizations have a key role to play in developing grass-roots activities. With that in mind, the Netherlands is considering supporting the idea of the establishment of a clearinghouse by Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, so that we can learn from both the successes and the caveats relating to dialogue activities at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Finally, religious leaders bear a major responsibility in this area, especially when it comes to interreligious dialogue. They can provide the right example: without denying the principles of their own faith, they can make it clear that one should also have respect for other religions and for those who choose not to adhere to any religion or to change their religion. Of course, every religion, almost by definition, claims to represent the truth. That can lead to the exclusion of others who believe in another truth. The more contacts take place among religious leaders and their followers, the more we will learn about the backgrounds of various religions and the easier it will become to truly understand and respect one another.

On 10 December 2008, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the city of The Hague, in cooperation with our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will organize a conference with many religious leaders from all over the world. We are hopeful that the leaders will, on that occasion, reaffirm their commitment to human rights and to the promotion of mutual understanding and respect.

The Netherlands will continue to remain actively engaged in initiatives aimed at reducing tensions among and within our respective societies. No country can succeed on its own though, and I therefore hope that this meeting will strengthen our joint efforts to overcome our differences and make this global village a place of peace and justice.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Viktor Voronin, Deputy Head of the State Committee on Nationalities and Religions of Ukraine.

Mr. Voronin (Ukraine) (*spoke in Russian*): Ukraine has created the necessary legal basis for the freedom of activity of religious organizations. Each organization is guaranteed the right to practice its religion and conduct worship services. Parents have the right to raise their children in accordance with their religious beliefs and in full privacy. The number of religious organizations in Ukraine has nearly tripled over the past 15 years. Proof of this religious renaissance is the fact that there are now 406 functioning monasteries, a nearly seven-fold increase, and more than 300 philanthropic missions are in operation.

The establishment of a constitutional and legal basis for freedom of belief and religion, along with the constitutional guarantees for preserving and developing cultural, linguistic and religious identities, has helped to strengthen the religious infrastructure of ethnic and religious minorities and has enriched their religious and spiritual life. Often divisions along national lines enter the religious sphere, and the religious needs of believers are met through services in their language in accordance with the religious traditions and customs of those ethnic groups. Most religious organizations in Ukraine reflect the characteristic spiritual, educational and religious needs of particular ethnic minorities. There are about 1500 religious communities within the national minorities, making up about 15 per cent of all religious organizations. Despite the complexities and diversity of religious life, Ukrainian society is convinced of the need to affirm general standards of the freedom of belief, as contained in international instruments signed by Ukraine and reflected in our domestic legislation.

Furthermore, social relations involving the freedom of conscience are influenced by the laws and activities of State authorities. Usually legal norms merely reflect prevailing spiritual and moral traditions. Given the multi-ethnicity and the many religions of Ukraine, tolerance arises in social consciousness through a national dialogue with the participation of representatives of government and of religious and social institutions. This country-wide religious dialogue is characterized by participation on many levels and there is a free exchange of views, a comparison of positions and an effort to resolve existing problems.

However, the form and content of the dialogue are not just limited to this, because they also provide for an active relationship and practical and agreed actions on the part of the participants as they seek to reach mutual understanding and agreement. Representatives of the religious world in Ukraine are very interested in establishing a dialogue with representatives of other faiths and teachings and in tolerance in their relations with them. I are pleased to note that this year in cooperation with non-governmental organizations in Kiev the summit on peace and tolerance was successfully held, which included the spiritual leaders of Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam and Judaism.

Although we speak of the creation of religious pluralism in Ukraine as a fait accompli, it should be remembered that this pluralism underlies the constructive interfaith relations and the unified multi-religious space that have been established. Religious pluralism means not only the presence of a number of religions but also their legal equality. In that context, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has a great positive influence on relations between the State and religious groups, strengthening harmony and tolerance among religious organizations.

The priorities of State policy in Ukraine regarding religion provide for a deepening of understanding between representatives of various faiths, so as to eliminate prejudice and mistrust.

Another priority area is the humanitarian sphere. Through their interaction, religious organizations develop common positions on urgent contemporary problems, in particular, problems involving globalization, the environment protection of human life and the institution of the family.

Another priority area in State policy is to ensure interethnic and interreligious harmony and ban the activities of extremist organizations and the dissemination of their hateful views. Various measures carried out by State authorities, together with the strategy of cooperation between the State and religious institutions, will help to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.

Ukraine supports the principles of the separation of Church and State and non-interference in the internal affairs of religious groups and will continue to support in many ways the functioning of religious organizations and to carefully protect the rights of believers. We expect that this will lead to a strengthening of peace and harmony and the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect in society.

Ukraine supports the efforts of the new President of the General Assembly to activate the dialogue on intercultural and interreligious understanding and on cooperation for peace. We not only are pleased to participate in this meeting and welcome this initiative, but we are also ready to get actively involved in joint efforts at the United Nations and at the regional and subregional levels, in particular in the Black Sea Cooperation Organization. We are ready to do this thanks to the fact that we are one of the few countries in the post-Soviet area that has been able to avoid open conflicts despite difficult interreligious and interethnic problems.

This entitles us to invite others to follow our example and work for understanding and tolerance and respect for religious freedoms and cultural diversity, both within our country as well as at the regional and subregional levels. We can assure you that the United Nations and its leadership can continue to count on Ukraine to promote interreligious and interethnic tolerance in the future.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on Her Excellency Ms. Byrganym Aitimova, Chairperson of the delegation of Kazakhstan.

Ms. Aitimova (Kazakhstan): First of all, I would like to congratulate you on your election to this high office and express confidence that under your skilful stewardship the sixty-second session of the United Nations General Assembly will be fruitful and successful.

The emergence of new challenges and threats to humankind, particularly the rise of international terrorism and religious extremism, often fed by interfaith tensions and hidden under the principles of religions, makes the need for religious education, tolerance and mutual understanding and respect of various cultures and civilizations even more urgent. Seeking an accord between religions and the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups is a crucially important element of the process of maintaining global security.

Therefore, we attach great importance to this high-level dialogue and its informal interactive meeting with civil society, which seek to further develop the outcomes of the key conferences and initiatives on the theme of dialogue among cultures and religions. We consider them all to be mutually inclusive, reinforcing and interrelated.

Kazakhstan acclaims the significant work of the United Nations system and its agencies in addressing challenges and seeking ways forward so as to find policies, structures and programmes that can foster a culture of peace. We welcome the outcomes of the informal thematic debate in the General Assembly on civilizations and the challenge for peace, which was held in May 2007 and produced a number of recommendations.

As a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Kazakhstan commends the valuable contribution of the Alliance and expresses its full support for the report of the High-level Group and the implementation plan based on it for 2007-2009, which is a guiding document with concrete proposals for the establishment of a network of relations among the various civilizations through activities in the areas of youth, education, media and migration.

We strongly believe that the culture of peace starts within us when we learn how to respect the inherent value and dignity of other cultures and religions and when we allow them to keep up their traditions. The moral standing of any society is judged by how it treats other nations and other peoples' cultures. Intolerance and conflict can be prevented through tireless efforts in day-to-day activities and by taking timely and concrete action at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Kazakhstan is home to 130 ethnic groups and 45 religious confessions and has set an example of tolerance which has become a decisive factor in the efforts to ensure peace, stability and the economic progress of our country. Since we gained our independence there have been no religious or inter-ethnic wars or conflicts on the territory of Kazakhstan. This is due to our State policies and geographical and historical background.

Kazakhstan is at the crossroads of Islamic, Christian and Buddhist cultures. Historically, religious diversity came to us along the Great Silk Road. The constitution of our country today provides the society

with the right to freedom of faith and expression, and the State encourages people to advocate and adhere to their own cultures and religions. We have integrated the history of religions and the promotion of tolerance into our school curricula.

Conscious of the critical importance of a dialogue between world religious confessions on key issues of the modern order, Kazakhstan hosted the Second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2006, the text of whose outcome document — the Declaration of the participants of the Congress — was circulated as a document of the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly.

Among other provisions, representatives of practically all traditional and world religions called upon the global community, international and regional organizations, States and Governments to work to establish a more just world, to consolidate international law and justice and to implement United Nations resolutions and signed international agreements. In addition, the Declaration called upon the world community to take concrete collective measures to encourage and highlight positive perceptions of interreligious relations by organizing joint meetings, seminars and addresses in the mass media, the Internet and other places of influence; by strongly promoting interreligious tolerance among younger generations to make them more devoted to dialogue and to encourage them to recognize universal values and integrate questions of dialogue between civilizations and religions into curricula at all educational levels, with a view to helping young people learn to respect and understand religious and cultural differences without hostility.

The Congress has become the vehicle for Kazakhstan's contribution to global dialogue among religions. I would like to reiterate the initiative which the President of Kazakhstan announced in his statement in the General Assembly general debate last week (see A/62/PV.4): to hold the Third Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2009 under the auspices of the United Nations. We express our hope that we can count on the full support of the Member States of the United Nations for the implementation of other initiatives of Kazakhstan, including the proposed declaration of one of the coming years as the Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures, as stated in General Assembly resolution 61/221, and the planned convening of an international forum entitled "Muslim world — West" at the end of 2008 in Kazakhstan at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs.

In conclusion, I would like to state that there are no problems in the world that cannot be solved if we set harmony, tolerance and spirituality against animosity, and if we base our relationships on mutual trust and cooperation. Let us work together to take concrete measures to identify causes of friction and reduce disagreements between nations, cultures and religions.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Heraldo Muñoz, chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Chile.

Mr. Muñoz (Chile) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of Chile, I would like to express my thanks for the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. This initiative can assist us in dealing with one of the most complex challenges faced by the international community as a whole: promoting respect and understanding among different religions, creeds and cultures.

This is a challenge which requires intense international cooperation. In that connection, various initiatives have been put forward which recognize the equal dignity of all cultures. Among them is the Alliance of Civilizations and its efforts to counteract the rise of terrorism and polarization through an implementation plan focusing on education, the media and youth and migration and whose goal is to help overcome the division between Islam and the West. The two initiatives converge in their respective spheres and can mutually strengthen each other with the necessary coordination.

As noted in the report of the Secretary-General entitled, "Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace" (A/62/337), UNESCO has underscored the importance of intercultural dialogue for social cohesion, reconciliation and peace and has recognized dialogue as a means of advancing women's human rights.

My country supports the recommendation of the Secretary-General to declare an International Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures.

The issue of peaceful coexistence among cultures and religions is not foreign to my country's historical experience. Indeed, Chile is and has been a land of refuge from political and religious persecution. A stanza in our national anthem alludes to that tradition of refuge, saying that Chile is the country of "asylum from oppression". The welcoming of foreigners is, therefore, one of our nation's most deeply rooted traditions.

Our country is home to the largest Palestinian community in the world outside the Middle East. It coexists in harmony with the Jewish community, setting an encouraging example. Various cultural traditions coexist peacefully in Chile against the backdrop of full and equal respect for religious freedom and fundamental freedoms. Churches of various denominations as well as mosques and synagogues operate freely in the country. The same is true in the area of education. The separation of church and State is the guiding principle of our democratic institutions.

The multilateral cultural policy of the Government of President Michelle Bachelet has developed from two basic principles: respect for and setting value on diversity and identity as fundamental prerequisites for positive globalization, and, secondly, the protection, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

Both governmental institutions and individuals must ensure that the media and educational programmes eradicate preconceived and exclusionary ideas. In Chilean schools, we have implemented a school coexistence policy, whose goal is for our sons and daughters to learn to live together by developing the skills, attitudes, values and knowledge necessary for their civic education and to enable them to have respect for diversity.

Chile promotes a vision of society and the world in which culture, respect for diversity and tolerance are prerequisites for ensuring the prevalence of respect for human rights, democracy and development, as well as international peace and security.

Within the framework of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Chile has promoted respect for various cultures and forms of artistic expression in the quest for a better understanding of universal values. In keeping with that political definition, Chile supported the adoption of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Likewise, at the United Nations, Chile voted in favour of the recent adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

All religions and cultures deserve full respect. Undoubtedly, this is an area in which caution and moderation must be exercised. We recognize that interreligious and intercultural dialogue makes a contribution to peace and harmony, but we believe that that cannot happen at the expense of freedom of expression.

Dialogue among religions and cultures should explore the link to the issue of democracy. Democracy guarantees respect for diversity, tolerance and the rights of all. In addition, evidence shows that conflicts and wars do not generally occur between democracies.

Finally, the contribution that my country can offer today in this forum is to turn our gaze towards a virtue that is characteristic of political coexistence and is present in democratic societies. I am referring to the concept of civic friendship, the respectful relationship that exists in politics — even between adversaries — which places the intrinsic value of a relationship and of mutual appreciation above differences or antagonisms. It is such civic friendship, based on mutual respect, that we believe should preside over the relations among religions and cultures.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Christian Wenaweser, head of the delegation of Liechtenstein.

Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein): Particularly since the events of 11 September 2001 there has been a growing concern about cross-cultural and interreligious tensions. Some have seen the world inevitably veering towards a clash of civilizations — a confrontation of monolithic, self-contained blocs. In discussing the challenges and opportunities related to intercultural and interreligious dialogue, we must reject a static concept of culture and civilization, as well as the notion that cultures are entities that need to be protected against anything foreign. A culture or civilization constantly evolves over time, adapts to new conditions and settings and is formed in interaction with other cultures and identities.

Embracing a dynamic concept of culture and identity is therefore a precondition for a meaningful

dialogue among civilizations and religions. It requires a willingness to learn and accept that one's own way of looking at and doing things is neither the only way nor, necessarily, the best way. Arrogance has no place in dialogue. In addition, dialogue among civilizations must not be distorted by differences in power: it has to be inclusive, and all participants have to be treated equally. We should take seriously the concern that there is a trend towards the predominance of one culture over the others, brought about by globalization and the present power structure.

Diversity yields many opportunities, but it may be regarded as a threat, because it challenges the ways of life to which we are accustomed and disturbs the comfort that human beings find in stability and the preservation of the status quo.

Owing to globalization, differences among cultures and religions have become starker, as modern communication technologies and fast, affordable forms of transport have led to a world where people of different backgrounds have the daily opportunity and need to interact. Under those circumstances, if we want to create a foundation for cooperation for peace through the fostering of intercultural and interreligious understanding, we will have to find ways to address people's fears and concerns regarding cultural and religious diversity. Education has to play a vital role in that respect.

Another key element is providing forums for dialogue, since one of the best ways to reduce prejudice is for people to get to know and understand one another. Access to the media and to information technology is crucial for that purpose. Bridging the digital divide is thus an important prerequisite for advancing intercultural and interreligious understanding.

Migration often leads to the transformation of relatively uniform communities and societies into multicultural ones and thereby gives rise to new challenges to social coherence and peace. Liechtenstein, for example, has experienced a tremendous influx of immigrants since the end of the Second World War — an influx that has been fuelled mainly by its economic success. With the number of foreigners in our country at 33.9 per cent, the Government and inhabitants of Liechtenstein are confronted with the challenge of interreligious and intercultural understanding on a regular basis.

The Government has taken a series of measures to promote the integration of migrants, to fight xenophobia and racism and to enhance understanding among various cultural and religious groups. One focus of the Government's policy is on the provision of targeted services aimed at enabling migrants to learn the national language. This helps to fulfil one of the basic preconditions for dialogue and socio-economic integration.

Another main concern is the institutionalization of dialogue among all cultural and religious groups in the country. Liechtenstein's Prime Minister has therefore, held several round-table meetings with migrants' associations. As a follow-up, a networking platform for migrants' associations and organizations active in the field of integration and intercultural dialogue has been set up.

As important as measures at the national level may be, the United Nations and other international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, are certainly appropriate forums for establishing an overall dialogue among civilizations and for fostering intercultural and interreligious understanding. Let us join our efforts within those frameworks and develop a common answer to terrorism, intolerance and racism.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Giancarlo Soler, head of the delegation of Panama.

Mr. Soler Torrijos (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of my delegation, I thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this meeting.

This year, important international conferences have strengthened the existing consensus about the fundamental principles of understanding between cultures and religions, and their value for peaceful cooperation. We are very glad to acknowledge that fact, even though we lack what is needed to achieve the social implementation of that consensus on a global scale and to make the results that we seek a reality.

The completion of that task requires persistent effort and support at many levels, and this is beyond the capacity of Governments. The effective implementation of that consensus requires a broad mobilization of the citizenry, something that social organizations have the ability to muster, with the plurality of their perspectives and ranges of action.

Of course, promoting tolerance and understanding between cultures and religions is essential to harmonizing relations between nations and social groups. Nevertheless, it is not enough to ensure the presence or maintenance of such tolerance. Fruitful coexistence between people of different cultures and beliefs is strengthened only when expectations and projects are shared and when the people believe that they can achieve those ends through common efforts.

Although cultural and religious disagreements and encounters have their own dynamic, we must examine them together with other factors. As previously stated, rival economic, environmental and territorial interests tend to give rise to tensions that can then be manipulated and exacerbated in the ethnic, cultural and religious arenas. The problem is far more complex when foreign interests are involved. That is why avoiding those interferences and ensuring and encouraging cooperation and synergy to foster a mutually beneficial undertaking will help to bridge the gap between parties.

The recent declaration recognizing the cultural and religious rights of indigenous peoples was a further step in the right direction. In order to promote a more balanced dynamic between the different ethno-cultural actors in a country, it is essential to recognize and value the cultural legacy of the native peoples who, together with the immigrant and Creole populations, enrich and shape the identity of the cultural conglomerate of each nation. Moreover, that recognition is valuable in easing the plight of those who struggle to satisfy other human development needs, such as citizenship, justice and equality of opportunity, which are all elements that mitigate the differences with other social groups.

It is only natural that, after centuries of marginalization, many native peoples should make impassioned demands for the recognition of their culture and beliefs. But this has sometimes kindled resentment and promoted confrontation that damage the socioeconomic integrity and governability of multi-ethnic States. In extreme cases, this leads to civil strife, which does nothing to improve the material and spiritual well-being of affected peoples.

To avoid such a scenario, we must ensure that this recognition can be assumed by everyone, not as a way of exalting our inequities, but as an opportune occasion for coexistence, exchange and an understanding of our differences as opportunities for complementarity in shared projects.

The option of building cooperation-oriented relationships requires us to highlight the many things cultures and religions have in common, as different ways of sustaining similar or compatible moral and humanitarian aspirations. However, in order for that effort to stress what we have in common — or not to stress our differences — we need continuous support from educational systems and the media.

The State has certain responsibilities with regard to the school system, but the media can also contribute constructively in that area. However, with regard to the media, we are generally dealing with private enterprises that frequently invoke their freedom of expression and may be reluctant to follow government guidelines. In such cases, social organizations can play an explanatory and critical role in the effort to eradicate all expressions of racism, xenophobia, intolerance and cultural exclusion.

No one will achieve these objectives on their own. International organizations, Governments and social organizations must all complement each other, together with cultural and religious organizations, in order for peace to become an inclusive and lasting reality.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I call next on His Excellency Mr. Steve Dick Tenyson Mantenje, Chairman of the delegation of Malawi.

Mr. Mantenje (Malawi): Allow me to begin by congratulating the President of the Assembly, for convening this important High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation and Understanding for Peace. We commend the Philippines and Pakistan for all their efforts and their pivotal role in making this meeting a reality.

The theme of the Dialogue, which is "interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity", has merit and is worthy of the time reserved for this High-level Dialogue.

Malawi attaches great importance to respect for religious and cultural diversity, particularly in the increasingly globalizing world we live in. We believe that respect for religious and cultural diversity can contribute to international cooperation, peace and

security and promote enhanced dialogue among nations. We therefore call upon the international community to create an environment that is conducive to the exchange of human experience with a view to combating violence, intimidation, hatred and intolerance based on cultural and religious differences, which in turn causes disunity among societies.

The founders of the United Nations envisioned a just and harmonious world when they established our Organization. We cannot achieve such a world through legal, political or military means alone, as we have attempted to during the 62 years of the existence of the United Nations. The contribution of our faiths and cultures is also required to facilitate a more just and harmonious world. Malawi therefore believes that the founders of the United Nations expected that the best parts of our diverse cultures — our religions strengths — would be a tremendous asset in achieving the noble objectives of the United Nations Charter.

Indeed, in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, our leaders acknowledged the diversity of the world and that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind. Accordingly, this Dialogue should be seen as yet another opportunity for the international community to continue to explore ways and means of furthering the agenda of promoting international peace and security and encouraging tolerance among different cultures and religions of the world, all of which are unique in their own respects.

Allow me to underline some important considerations that must be taken into account as we map out the way forward in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. First, we believe that there is a need to establish education systems that promote respect for diversity; secondly, the media at all levels must support and encourage dialogue in an ethical and responsible manner; and thirdly, countries must promote the effective utilization of information technology in order to promote greater dialogue and understanding, especially among young people. Malawi commends UNESCO for its contribution in that respect.

At the national level, Malawi continues to be committed to the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with particular reference to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In that regard, the Malawi Constitution guarantees various fundamental rights, including the right of every person to use the language — and participate in the cultural life — of his or her choice. It also guarantees freedom of association, conscience, opinion and assembly and freedom of the press. In addition, it guarantees to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on the grounds of race; colour; sex; language; religion; political or other opinion; national, ethnic or social origin; disability; property; birth; or other status. On the basis of those constitutional provisions, the Malawi Government has progressively formulated policies and enacted laws aimed at creating an enabling environment for the promotion of understanding, tolerance and friendship among the people of Malawi, irrespective of their cultural or religious diversity or language. Further, Malawi is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

While challenges in bringing about complete interreligious and cultural harmony still exist, all religions and cultural sectors in Malawi are committed to peaceful coexistence. That is what has made Malawi a relatively peaceful country since its independence, in 1964.

In conclusion, Malawi supports the recommendation, contained in the Secretary-General's report, that the General Assembly should declare a Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures. We share the belief that a peaceful world can be assured only through mutual understanding and interreligious and cultural dialogue. We also support the proposal that a focal unit be established within the Secretariat to follow up on interreligious and cultural issues.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Basilio Antonio Gutiérrez García, Chairman of the delegation of Cuba.

Mr. Gutiérrez García (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): Today, more than ever before, it is essential to reaffirm the importance of full respect for the political, economic, cultural, social and religious diversity of every nation, in strict conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In a world characterized by neoliberal globalization, corporatization and privileged consumerism, global power elites impose on others their own cultural patterns as an instrument of their neocolonial policies. Although various initiatives have encouraged respect for cultural diversity and the

promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, today's world bears witness to genocidal wars promoted by the Powers of the North in their voracious pursuit of hegemonic dominance.

Cuba views with great concern the escalation of the grave human rights violations committed in the name of the so-called war on terror, particularly the manifestations of hatred, xenophobia, religious intolerance and discrimination against national, ethnic and religious minorities, which are further exacerbated when the victims are of Arab origin or of the Muslim faith.

The practice in the Western media of projecting a negative image of Islam and the attempt to identify some cultures with terrorism and violence have heightened the ongoing threat to the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons affiliated with that faith. Compounding the situation is the rise in racist, discriminatory and xenophobic views concerning the superiority of races, cultures and nations — views that have been among the main causes of distressing conflicts throughout history. It is our duty to prevent a repetition of such conflicts.

Given that worrisome reality, it is imperative that we preserve the human race, safeguard the identity of every people and promote a culture of peace based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among nations. An important step forward in the attainment of those objectives was the entry into force, on 18 March 2007, of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted by 148 countries, which is a milestone in our joint struggle to preserve the important human right to diversity.

Recently, during the Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity, held in Iran, the members of the Movement, including Cuba, endorsed the adoption of the Tehran Declaration and Programme of Action, which sets out a series of actions aimed at defending cultural diversity. Likewise, we hope that the international review conference on the implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action will be an important opportunity to discuss this issue within the framework of the global fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Today, more than ever before, we must reaffirm the right of peoples to self-determination, whereby they freely determine their own political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Let us work to create a democratic and equitable international order, based on dialogue, cooperation and cultural exchange, that prevents cultural homogenization and the domination of peoples.

Let us promote dialogue among cultures and civilizations and vigorously oppose the pretext of the so-called clash of civilizations, which is used by those who threaten the peace and security of our peoples.

Let us promote international solidarity, without conditions, to promote genuine development of the countries of the South while sharing a common heritage of universal values that are opposed to any irrational hatred among the world's human beings.

Let us work to realize the right to education, according particular importance to education based on a spirit of tolerance and friendship among all human beings, whereby religious diversity, international understanding and peace are respected in a world with equal social justice for all.

Let us utilize communication technologies, including the Internet, to disseminate a message of constructive dialogue and understanding among diverse cultures and civilizations.

Let us work to establish cultural policies that defend our national identities and protect our heritage while promoting mutual enrichment among nations.

Let us advocate the globalization of diversity. Let us demand respect for the rights of minorities, the excluded and the marginalized. By defending understanding among cultures and religions today, we are defending our right to preserve the future of humanity.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Dato' Kamilan Maksom, Chairman of the delegation of Malaysia.

Mr. Maksom (Malaysia): I wish to take this opportunity to express to the President of the General Assembly our appreciation for convening this High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I also take this opportunity to thank the delegations of the Philippines and Pakistan for initiating this dialogue. We see this as a timely effort at bringing our various

cultures religions and peoples together to engage in dialogue amongst ourselves under the auspices of the United Nations.

Malaysia is fully supportive of efforts at the international level which are designed to generate greater understanding between religions, cultures and civilizations. In fact, we have been involved in efforts to build bridges among religions, cultures and civilizations, including organizing an international interfaith dialogue entitled, "Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for the West?", which was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2006 and 2007. Additionally, along with Cyprus, Malaysia co-hosted the second annual Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue, held in July 2006. Malaysia was also one of the sponsors of the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which was held on 22 June 2005. We are pleased to note the participation of the civil society and including non-governmental organizations and the private sector at those dialogues, which we believe will clearly enhance our mutual efforts towards promoting intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious understanding. That larger participation also represents the determined will of the international community to cooperate for peace. Indeed, for this sort of dialogue to be successful, the widest range of partners and stakeholders needs to be involved.

Our world continues to be besieged with conflicts among nations and among peoples, despite our progress into modernity and democracy. Cultural and religious differences are said to be the causes of our present-day conflicts; yet we know very well that they are spawned by differences in our particular viewpoints. When we should be celebrating the beauty of diversity among peoples, some, including zealots, distract from this and instead highlight cultural and religious differences and transforming those differences into divisions. Moreover, self-centric societies which view other peoples and cultures from the perspective of their own benchmarks and philosophies while imposing their values onto other societies, contribute to the atmosphere of acrimony and distrust among peoples.

Just as religion is taken to extremes, so too is the notion of democracy, including freedom of speech and expression, which on many occasions is taken to extremes, ignoring the sensitivities and feelings of certain groups of people. The oppression and ill-treatment of certain groups of people by States and, in some cases, by people of different persuasions, as in the case of Palestinian people and Muslim minorities in certain parts of the world, also contribute to the growing among between cultures and religions, particularly between the Western world and Islam.

This dangerous trend of a growing schism among different cultures and religions must be addressed immediately lest it present a serious threat to international peace. We need to bridge this gap and narrow down any differences we have. As a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multireligious country which celebrated 50 years of nationhood of this year, Malaysia understands very well the challenges the world will be confronted with if this dangerous trend is not reversed.

Malaysia believes that the key to bringing all of us closer and to narrowing this gap is to build a culture of respect. Respect for one another will propagate understanding and tolerance; tolerance of our rich diversity will create the understanding needed for us to bridge the gap among our cultures and civilizations.

Malaysia views its role today as part of an intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue, where all parties need to ensure that we multiply the bridge-builders and focus on the common values that we share. We need to approach dialogue with mutual respect from all dimensions including ethnicity, culture and religion, as well as with mutual respect for different cultures and nationalities. Political viewpoints should not cloud our common values.

While we work towards fostering dialogue in this high-level forum, of equal if not greater importance is the need to focus on our subsequent work on ensuring that that our interactions at this Dialogue and all other dialogues of this nature flow to the people at the grass-roots level. Our dialogue should be people-centred and people-oriented, rather then State-centric. Our dialogue is too often crouched in political or academic language and terms which become too vague or convoluted. We therefore need to translate our ideas and thoughts into practical measures and ways for the masses to understand and appreciate.

One way is through education. We believe that education is an essential tool towards developing greater understanding and stemming the rising tide of intolerance and distrust. Our youth should be guided into understanding the beauty of our diversity as opposed to its contradictions. The sense of

understanding, tolerance, sensitivity and awareness of other cultures and persuasions must be instilled and fostered in each layer of the society, particularly young people. An intermixing of young minds and ideas through unbiased and responsible guidance would promote a culture of respect, tolerance and understanding. Malaysia is convinced that, through the establishment of more youth cooperation programmes, understanding and the appreciation of the values and beliefs systems of others will be forged.

Malaysia recognizes the important role of the media in promoting in interfaith and intrafaith dialogue. Unfortunately, we note that most international media tend to highlight the differences rather than the commonalities among other cultures and religions. We see the labelling of certain groups of people as counterproductive with respect to building understanding and trust among peoples. This creates confusion rather than clarity.

Labelling furthermore has the potential to be self-prophesizing, since no one specific word can perfectly capture a particular human phenomenon. It is therefore important to use words and language which create confidence and take into account the sensitivities of others, in order to create a culture of respect, understanding and tolerance.

At the same time, the international media must also give sufficient space to voices that speak of harmony, tolerance and moderation. The voices of facilitators and communicators who build bridges of goodwill among cultures and religions must be highlighted to muffle voices of those who preach extremism and hatred.

Malaysia remains committed to efforts, particularly through the United Nations, towards generating respect, understanding and tolerance among cultures, religions and civilizations. We believe that positive interaction among peoples of diverse cultures and values will help to achieve the aim of preserving and promoting global peace, stability and harmony. We are convinced that the culture of peace lies with mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among religions, cultures and peoples.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Rosemary Banks, Chairperson of the delegation of New Zealand.

Ms. Banks (New Zealand): New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said this year that "We do not accept that there is anything inevitable or unavoidable about tension and conflict between ethnicities, cultures and faiths". New Zealand considers that tensions arising from ignorance, unfamiliarity and a lack of understanding can be mitigated by dialogue, by education and by a willingness to learn from and be tolerant of others. That view is encapsulated in General Assembly resolution 61/221 and underpins the holding of this important high-level dialogue, commendably promoted by the Philippines and Pakistan. It is certainly a dialogue that New Zealand supports.

New Zealand's commitment to interfaith and intercultural dialogue is part of our wider response to helping build a more secure and peaceful world. Our involvement in various initiatives, such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, reinforces our wider regional and global counter-terrorism and peacekeeping efforts.

In May 2007, New Zealand hosted two significant gatherings to advance the global response to interfaith and intercultural issues in a practical way. First, for two days in May, our Prime Minister personally hosted, in coordination with the Government of Norway, a high-level symposium on the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations. As a friend of the Alliance and viewing the Alliance as the most important initiative of its kind, New Zealand wanted the High-level Group's report to receive serious consideration in our Asia-Pacific region.

The symposium succeeded in drawing out those recommendations that have particular potential and relevance for implementation in our region. Participants canvassed regional approaches to cross-cultural education and curriculum development, including through contacts between Islamic studies centres, broader youth exchanges and networks, a new programme of intercultural exchange in the region, media literacy, cross-cultural training for journalists, better engagement with media owners, development of humane migration systems and better integration of migrants into local communities.

New Zealand will be working with regional partners and the Alliance of Civilizations secretariat to promote the symposium's outcomes and the Alliance's

implementation plan within our region. As a first step, New Zealand has recently contributed NZ $50,000 to the Alliance's trust fund, earmarked for projects in South-East Asia.

We are pleased to see that the momentum of the Alliance continues to build in the lead-up to the first Alliance forum in Spain early next year, alongside a global youth forum. New Zealand looks forward to participating actively at those events.

Secondly, later in May this year, New Zealand hosted the third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, a process that is co-sponsored by Indonesia, Australia and the Philippines. The Regional Interfaith Dialogue brings together representatives of the major faith and community groups of 15 countries in the South-East Asia region and adjacent South Pacific to explore cooperation and communication and to build understanding and mutual respect among the adherents of our region's different religious faiths.

The Action Plan adopted from that meeting held in Waitangi sets out a range of proposals for practical action. Those include recommendations for improving networking and connections between and within faith communities; recommendations aimed at fostering tolerance and understanding of other religions in both the public and religious education systems and also recommendations to improve the quality and critical stance of the coverage of religious issues in the media.

The inclusion of intra-faith discussions in the Interfaith Dialogue agenda was another key outcome for New Zealand. We see intra-faith discussion as a means to build lasting networks, particularly amongst the region's Muslim communities, which could be a force for moderation and pluralism. While our Regional Interfaith Dialogue is narrower than the inter-civilizational focus of the Alliance, there are a number of useful synergies, and the two processes have — we think — much to contribute to each other. Both promote diversity as a fundamental strength of human society.

New Zealand's effort is only a part of the growing national, regional and international efforts to build, as through this High-level Dialogue, interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. We commend the important leadership that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization continues to show in that area and welcome the contribution of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding and the Asia-Europe Meeting's Interfaith Dialogue, to name just a few of the many valuable processes now underway.

However, I have to underline the importance of ensuring that our dialogue this week and the other valuable ongoing processes are not simply to the intellectual benefit of those who have the privilege to partake in them. A key outcome from our Auckland symposium was agreement that programmes put in place as a result of those exchanges need to reach beyond the elite and touch those sections of society that will determine whether we can reach our shared goal of building interreligious and intercultural understanding.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Park Hee-kwon, Chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Park Hee-kwon (Republic of Korea): The new circumstances we face today are manifested in a form of competition between integration and confrontation. On the one hand, increasing economic integration driven by modern technology is changing human relations by breaking down barriers of communication and distance. Globalization of that kind is now the defining trend of our world. On the other hand, that major trend is not necessarily ushering in a world of peace and prosperity.

Globalization shows evidence of both a bright and dark face simultaneously. The shortening of distances removes mediating buffer zones between peoples of different backgrounds, which can trigger cultural and social tensions. As an illustration, globalization has met with strong protest in some quarters. It is perceived by many as a means of imposing Western values in non-Western parts of the world. In addition, rising extremism stands in the way of achieving respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. That dark side, if left unattended, may give rise to misunderstanding and mistrust among different cultures. It is likely to undermine efforts aimed at establishing peace and prosperity.

First and foremost, I believe we must bear in mind that the common denominator of all cultures and religions is a message of love and brotherhood. With that ideal before us, the Republic of Korea welcomes the recent adoption by the Member States of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples. My Government believes that the Declaration will contribute to strengthening dialogue among cultures by promoting equality and non-discrimination for all and especially for marginalized indigenous peoples.

Let me turn to the root causes of intercultural misunderstanding, namely, poverty, human rights violations and a disregard for the danger of armed conflicts; the historical fault lines of race, religion and cultural traditions also encourage mutual distrust. In order to further our common goals of tolerance, mutual understanding and the observance of human rights, the United Nations must root out the potential causes of hostility. In that sense, revitalizing multilateralism is critical to addressing our shared challenges. The United Nations is the best vehicle for that process.

However, our efforts to avoid potential misunderstandings have been slow, given the urgent need for dialogue among cultures and civilizations. That said, the United Nations system should be more inclusive and open to civil society. Dealing with this particular challenge will be difficult, requiring partnerships between stakeholders. We must strengthen cooperation between all actors, including Governments, international organizations and the institutions of civil society. An all-inclusive United Nations system intent on alliance-building with distant branches of the world community — and especially with institutions in civil society such as religious groups — can play a role in tracking and dissolving the essential causes of distrust.

The good news is that initiatives in this direction, such as the Alliance of Civilizations, are beginning to take hold. Indeed, we welcome initiatives such as the Alliance and support cooperation with the United Nations system.

Given the limited resources for our endeavours, we must set priorities when implementing any such initiatives. The report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations recommended that we focus attention on such issues as immigration, youth, politics and education.

Furthermore, initiatives for dialogue among civilizations should be planned and implemented in a way compatible with system-wide coherence in the United Nations system. This will not only avoid duplication, but also enhance the effectiveness of these endeavours.

As part of my Government's effort to encourage dialogue among world youth, the Republic of Korea is planning to hold a youth forum alongside the second World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, to be held in 2009 and co-sponsored by the United Nations. I hope the Conference will provide an opportunity for world youth to deepen their mutual understanding.

We live in challenging times. With the advance of globalization, economic integration can heighten cultural friction. Managing these stresses in such a way that they do not slip out of control is a daunting task. Merely recognizing the need for and the merits of dialogue is not sufficient. Strong political will is required. The Republic of Korea believes that peacebuilding, the achievement of the Millennial Development Goals and respect for human rights should be the bedrock on which to forge a fair and mutual understanding among all the peoples of the world.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Gilles Noghès, Chairman of the delegation of Monaco.

Mr. Noghès (Monaco) (*spoke in French*): Dialogue between civilizations must be recognized as a fundamental principle with regard to establishing and maintaining tolerant and peaceful relations between people from different traditions, cultures or religions.

It is surprising that it took 20 centuries of our conventional era before the importance of cultural diversity was recognized. How is it conceivable that people still sometimes set freedom and tolerance in opposition to each other? According to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which that no one else. Emmanuel Lévinas said, in a remarkable manner, that liberties, far from being in conflict, call out to each other and mutually awaken each other. In fact, the coexistence of liberties rests on the principle of tolerance.

We must recognize differences and respect them. At the same time we should know how to condemn violence without drawing false parallels. Terrorism should not in any way be allowed to lead to the interruption of dialogue or to intolerance. When Jean-Paul Sartre says "Hell is other people", he meant that each person is the torturer of the other, by constantly subjecting them to judgment. We must leave this hell.

to which we are led by misunderstandings and the absence of dialogue.

Our delegation aligns itself with the statement by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, who, speaking on behalf of the European Union, mentioned resolution 61/161, adopted by consensus last year by this Assembly, on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, as an example of a commitment aiming at guaranteeing that fundamental freedom.

We also fully subscribe to the initiative presented by Spain and Turkey in support of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Joe Pemagbi, Chairman of the delegation of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Pemagbi (Sierra Leone): The delegation of Sierra Leone welcomes the opportunity to participate in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. We take note with appreciation of the report of the Secretary-General on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and peace (A/62/337) and the report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010 (A/62/97). The involvement of civil society in those activities and their participation in this dialogue should serve as a reminder of the fact that the promotion of understanding, peace and cooperation is not the exclusive prerogative of Governments.

This dialogue should, first of all, serve as a reminder of our obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular to promote and encourage respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Secondly, we should remind ourselves that the United Nations is itself the epitome of intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

Here we are, in this great Hall, and under one dome, as representatives of the peoples of the world: men and women of all races from almost 200 nations, representing peoples of all beliefs and shades of unbelief, speaking hundreds of languages and dialects. In spite of political and other differences, and sometimes communicating in discordant tones, we try to interact, to respect one another, to tolerate one another and, to paraphrase the Charter, to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.

Tolerance is one of the seven national values of Sierra Leone. In spite of its status in the international system of economic and social development, Sierra Leone enjoys one of the highest levels of religious tolerance in the world today. Indeed, Sierra Leone is a model of interreligious understanding. As former President Kabbah once observed in a Ramadan message to the nation, "Those who want to see religious tolerance at its best, let them come to Sierra Leone." In a few days' time, in connection with Eid al-Fitr, the end of the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims and Christians in Sierra Leone will all join in the celebration of Ramadan. Major religious observances such as the feasts of Eid al-Adha, Good Friday, Easter, Christmas and Ramadan are national holidays in Sierra Leone. It is not uncommon for a Christian and Muslim couple to perform the rites of holy matrimony in a church or in a mosque. I should add that virtually every public meeting opens with short Muslim and Christian prayers. We are proud of those practices, because they help to promote respect, tolerance and understanding.

In our view, religion should, as far as possible, be used as an instrument of national development. We acknowledge the important role that religious institutions and denominations have played and are still playing in the establishment and maintenance of primary and secondary schools in Sierra Leone. We have also used religion positively as an instrument of peace, healing, reconciliation and national cohesion, especially in connection with the 11-year rebel war. For instance, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone made a significant contribution to the peace process.

We acknowledge that education, like religion, can be a powerful tool for promoting peace and cooperation. Having emerged from armed conflict, Sierra Leone has found it necessary to create and implement a number of peace education programmes and projects. For instance, as indicated in paragraph 3 of the report prepared by the Director-General of UNESCO in connection with activities for the

International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, the agency has coordinated a project on integrating peace and intercultural understanding in formal and non-formal education programmes. We support the recommendation in the report for increasing educational efforts to develop curricula, textbooks and activities that teach cultural and religious tolerance.

Peace education has also been developed at the tertiary education level. In cooperation with the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom, we now have a peace and conflict studies degree-granting programme at the University of Sierra Leone. The programme needs further support to strengthen its curriculum in the areas of conflict prevention and management, including indigenous or transitional forms of conciliation and resolution.

In the area of non-formal public education, the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights is also demonstrating the importance of education in promoting peace and understanding in Sierra Leone. Established during the course of the armed conflict, the Commission is the leading institution for educating the public about the Constitution, democratic principles and the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance, reconciliation, respect for others' values, patriotism and loyalty to the State. The objectives of the Commission are, in effect, consistent with conflict prevention.

Sierra Leone believes that the media constitute one of the most potent instruments for the promotion of intercultural understanding, cooperation and peace. Unfortunately, in a few unfortunate instances, the media at both the national and international levels have, consciously or unconsciously, fanned the flames of intolerance. After all, irrespective of our professions and our national and corporate interests, we are tenants of one world. We are all potential victims of the consequences of intolerance, especially extreme forms of religious, ethnic and cultural intolerance.

My delegation therefore endorses the recommendation contained in the report of the UNESCO Director-General, urging the media, at the international and national levels, to support the global campaign for a culture of peace and a dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Anwar Toman Barout Saleem Al Barout, chairman of the delegation of the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Al Barout (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me pleasure at the outset to express on behalf of the United Arab Emirates our thanks and appreciation for the President's remarkable efforts in guiding the work of this session. We are confident that his expertise and skills will effectively contribute to the successful achievement of the General Assembly's objectives.

Historical events have proven that the continuation of some cases of aggression, occupation, violence, contradictions, imbalances and cultural and economic hegemony of developed States against developing nations have exacerbated the feelings of injustice, inequality and marginalization among the peoples of some of those developing nations. Those feelings were associated with new forms of hostility and mistrust among communities. They provided the breeding grounds for the emergence of new security threats, including extremism, terror, violence and revenge. This prompts us, now more than ever, to endeavour to contain the root causes of those phenomena, reverse the growing disparities among communities and enhance closeness and rapprochement among these communities in accordance with the principles of transparency, justice and equality, as called for in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The United Arab Emirates has supported all efforts by the Secretary-General and by States and Governments to reinforce the concept of dialogue among civilizations and promote a culture of peace and respect for religions. Our State was among the first to lend its strong support to the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative launched by the Secretary-General in 2005. We made a contribution of $1 million for strengthening its mechanisms on the basis of our belief in the need to mobilize international, collective and concerted action to create a new global environment in which all States are able to live peacefully.

The United Arab Emirates, which believes in the principle of respect for human dignity and the rights and beliefs of all human beings without exception according to the teachings of Islam, has enacted the necessary legislation and regulations for protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of all its inhabitants,

including all residents and foreigners working in the United Arab Emirates, regardless of their nationality, religion, language or origin. Convinced that science, culture and knowledge are the foundations for the progress of nations and the cornerstones for the building of human civilization, the United Arab Emirates has implemented a number of initiatives in order to strengthen its cultural ties with the rest of the world. Among those initiatives was the $2 million Zayed book award, designed to motivate and encourage outstanding writers and intellectuals who contribute to various fields of Arab culture and human culture as a whole. Efforts were also made to bring the experience of the world's most prestigious universities and museums to the United Arab Emirates by, for example, launching the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi University and inaugurating the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museums. The Emirates Foundation was also established, in order to raise our educational, technological, intellectual and research resources to the highest global level.

The United Arab Emirates has also hosted several meetings, conferences and workshops in order to promote the exchange of knowledge, expertise and culture and advance interreligious and intercultural dialogue and understanding. We have participated in bilateral, regional and international programmes aimed at achieving concerted action to bring together peoples of different cultures and civilizations and to strengthen tolerance, respect and dialogue among them.

Our State's interest in promoting intercultural dialogue extends beyond the national level to include direct contributions for the protection of the common heritage of mankind. Further, initiatives undertaken include: the humanitarian cultural initiative launched three days ago by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum, our Vice-President and Prime Minister, whose goals is to educate one million children in the poor regions of the world; the election last June of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee in charge of implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; the biennial $150,000 Zayed award for heritage, under the auspices of UNESCO, which aims at promoting human activity and protecting all forms of cultural heritage, including the preservation of masterpieces of traditional, folkloric and other intangible and endangered heritage in the world; the cultural weeks organized in various capitals in the world to introduce the long-standing cultural traditions and achievements of the United Arab Emirates; the international Culture Village established in Dubai to host various culturally diverse museums, exhibitions and theatres from all over the world; the Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation, which supported and honoured various national, Arab and international eminent personas for their literary, cultural and humanitarian achievements; and specialized international seminars and exhibitions organized every year by the workshop on culture and science since 1978.

The Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage is also in charge of developing cultural policies, plans and programmes with a view to preserving, developing and promoting the cultural identity of the United Arab Emirates at the international level. The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research issues publications, reports and studies in English and Arabic and organizes annual conferences, seminars and workshops to promote scientific, informational, cultural and research exchange and to cooperate with different regional and international research centres in serving the objectives of cultural rapprochement in all areas of human relations.

In conclusion, we endorse the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations established by the Secretary-General and its important political views on the pressing nature of the Palestinian question, which is the main factor behind the widening gap between Muslim and Western societies today. We call upon the General Assembly, to pay serious heed to the recommendations of the High-level Group, which demand that Israel accept and facilitate the process of establishing an independent and viable Palestinian State, living side by side with Israel in peace and security, in accordance with international law and the relevant legitimate resolutions. In this way, the state of hostility and conflict in the region can be ended, and we can avoid its negative consequences, which have been the leading cause of the outbreak of violence, incitement and tension, not only in the Middle East, but in many different regions in recent years. In this context, we would also like to stress the need to compel Israel to halt all measures aimed at obliterating Palestinian cultural and national identity in the occupied territories, including its ongoing attempts to ravage religious, educational and cultural sites,

foremost among which are Al-Quds Al-Sharif and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which constitute a flagrant violation of the provisions of international law, human rights and the principle of cultural diversity.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam, chairman of the delegation of Sri Lanka.

Mr. Kariyawasam (Sri Lanka): The High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is taking place at an opportune moment. The decision by the General Assembly to convene this event is a manifestation of the interest of the international community and the United Nations in promoting a dialogue on this important issue. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines on spearheading the adoption of resolution 61/269, which paved the way for this event. This initiative will no doubt build on several similar initiatives undertaken by the United Nations in the recent past, including the dialogue among civilizations.

The fact that this meeting takes place on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and at the commencement of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly makes it doubly significant.

We humans inherently possess both diverse and common values and ethics based on specific circumstances and age-old traditions. While the commonality of our beliefs can unite us, the diversity of our views and traits can enrich our knowledge and life experience. Our diversity therefore need not be a cause for division or conflict.

As human civilization began to advance, the great teachers and messengers of peace identified, in the very early years of human advancement, the need for human beings to cooperate for coexistence and to promote peace in society and community. All predominant religions in the world have, at their core, compassion and the promotion of peace. It is within that framework that the international community needs to focus on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace, and it is timely that this Assembly is giving a sense of direction to this dialogue.

The key to success is promoting common values and aspects in all religions and cultural traditions that promote understanding between cultures and religions and engender respect for diversity and for others. In this effort it is essential to emphasize the word "tolerance" in its broadest possible sense. Tolerance implies our respect for the unknown and even empathizing with dislike. Several great religions in the world have taught us the essence of tolerance in different manifestations.

My country, Sri Lanka, in its 2,500-year recorded history, has remained multicultural and multireligious. The creed of tolerance taught in Buddhism has been ingrained in our society ever since the teachings of the Buddha took root in my country under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka of India. Tolerance and compassion towards the other has been the key to our civilization. As an island nation, it has been our tradition to welcome all new ideas and influences and to integrate new trends into our society, complementing what already exists and promoting understanding of and cooperation with the new. Religious diversity has never been a cause for division. In fact, in Sri Lanka it is common to find Buddhist temples, Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples within close proximity of one another and often on the same street. They coexist in harmony, with the worshippers at each shrine assisting the others. Tolerance of others' religions is a tradition that we hold dear.

While Buddhism, the predominant religion in my country, has contributed to the mainstream ethos in Sri Lanka, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and other religions have coexisted with it and have enriched the values of our people, thus making interreligious cooperation and understanding a fact of everyday life. The key to that trend has been the tolerance and understanding displayed by those who adhere to the various religions in my country.

It is essential that we understand the unity of thought and the essence of truth in all major religions, which promote similar values for the good of human beings. No religion promotes hurting others for any purpose. For example, Buddhism says, "Do not hurt others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful". Taoism says, "Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain and your neighbour's loss as your own loss". Christianity says, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them". Confucius says, "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you". Islam says, "Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you, and reject for others what you would reject for yourself".

Hinduism says, "Let no one do to others what he would not have done to himself".

In this age of exponentially advancing technology and interconnectedness, there is a tendency for predominant economic and political power to manifest itself as a force of cultural domination, overwhelming vulnerable and weak societies. This trend, when perceived as unwelcome, can act against understanding and cooperation, thus causing societies and peoples to become militant. It is therefore essential to be sensitive to such phenomena and to take cognizance of the right of every individual, every community and every society to stand on its own and to cooperate and understand of its own volition.

In that context, we welcome the Dialogue taking place today in the General Assembly. It is our belief that frank exchanges of views on all aspects of religious and cultural commonality and diversity will help the peoples of our globalizing world to promote peace and understanding.

We have just celebrated the International Day of Non-Violence in the General Assembly as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, in recognition of his efforts to spread the creed of non-violence throughout the modern world. It is auspicious that this meeting is taking place in the wake of that event. A view that he expressed is very relevant to our discourse today:

> "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Those words of Mahatma Gandhi sum up the approach that we need in order to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Youcef Yousfi, chairman of the delegation of Algeria.

Mr. Yousfi (Algeria) (*spoke in French*): Algeria welcomes the holding of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, particularly since it is taking place within the United Nations, which remains the natural framework for dialogue among civilizations, the melting pot of cultures and the irreplaceable rostrum for opinions that characterize the human family.

Mr. Kiriyawasam (Sri Lanka), Vice-President, took the Chair.

What are the results of the implementation of the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted in 2001? What is the state of interreligious dialogue and, by extension, the dialogue among cultures and civilizations in a globalized world that, as noted by the Chinese professor Tu Wei-ming, is obviously far from being a place where dialogue, harmony and peace prevail?

How do we oppose the culture of ignorance, scorn for others, stereotypes, discrimination based on culture and religion, deliberate equivocation, supporters of the clash of civilizations, defamation of religions, and racist and xenophobic political platforms and statements, which are, quite simply, insults to human intelligence?

Interreligious dialogue is essential to prevent the development of disastrous wars between religions, which, because they share a sense of the sacred, all bear messages of peace, tolerance and salvation.

It is particularly unfortunate to note that, in today's world, many prejudices have clouded the understanding of Islam by suggesting that that religion of peace is synonymous with oppression, intolerance, extremism and terrorism, whereas it preaches respect and values dialogue.

In the holy Koran and in the Sunna, interreligious dialogue and the right of every individual to freedom of thought and religion are unequivocally affirmed. Islam considers variety and human diversity to be assets, and people are invited to move beyond mere coexistence and to actively seek to engage in dialogue and to develop relationships of mutual assistance and solidarity.

As a result of its geographic situation, my country lies at the crossroads of several civilizations. That situation has given us an openness to others and a broad perspective on world affairs.

Algeria, which witnessed the birth and accomplishments of the great thinker and philosopher Saint Augustine, who made contributions to universal progress and, more specifically, to the development of Western thought, has always supported human endeavours to promote the culture of peace, dialogue among civilizations and interreligious understanding and to enshrine cultural diversity.

My country, which endorses the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted by resolution 56/6, took an active part, through the person of His Excellency President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in the International Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples, held on 5 April 2005 at UNESCO headquarters, and expresses its support for the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Algeria hopes that that initiative will be able to make an effective, practical, frank and courageous contribution to our collective efforts for peace, understanding and tolerance. We welcome the recent appointment of the High Representative for the Alliance.

Algeria also believes that any idea of dialogue and cooperation would be meaningless if the international community does not at the same time address the imperative of socio-economic development. To that end, it is urgent that the international community tackle poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation, which are universal scourges that transcend cultural differences.

Any idea of dialogue must be long-term and must be affirmed as an ongoing means of bringing people and communities closer together and spreading the culture of peace everywhere and at all levels.

Before concluding, I wish to reiterate my country's gratitude to UNESCO's Culture Sector, particularly its Interreligious Dialogue programme, but also to its Education and Social and Human Sciences sectors, which remain the best defences against ignorance and conflict and natural vehicles for humanism, critical reason, harmony and peace. Certainly much has been done to bring human beings closer to each other, to dispel misunderstanding and to avoid prejudgments. However, much remains to be done. We have the necessary tools but we must all show greater commitment and responsibility.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Adiyatwidi Adiwoso Asmady, chairperson of the delegation of Indonesia.

Mrs. Asmady (Indonesia): Allow me to join others in expressing appreciation for the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. That this event is taking place at such a level is indicative of the importance attached to the issue. We share that view.

Indonesia is convinced that dialogue among nations helps in the cultivation of a culture of peace. That is why Indonesia has always been an enthusiastic supporter of dialogue among civilizations as a way of bringing the peoples of the world closer together. We see dialogue as an essential tool for building bridges between faiths and cultures. At the grass roots, it is an effective tool for peace if it is carried out intensively and extensively.

Since tension and conflict may arise not only between those who profess different religions but also between factions within the same religion, intrafaith dialogue should also be encouraged in order to foster harmony among those who profess the same religion.

Indonesia is committed to promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation. We have a centuries-old tradition of dialogue called "musyawarah", which means consultation, and "mufakat", which stands for consensus. The practice of consultation and consensus-seeking has been our way of dealing with pluralism and bringing it to the benefit of everyone. That is how we have sustained our cultural diversity without sacrificing national unity.

As a result of that outlook and in a country of great diversity and size, we see diversity as a blessing, not a disadvantage. Although it is also capable of leading to misunderstanding and tension, in such cases we are able to take advantage of those traditional tools as well as modern ones.

One of the modern tools is education, which is essential in promoting harmony in diversity. A good education teaches children about unity and common threads. It emphasizes that differences in theology and cultural traditions do not make anyone inferior or preclude people from living and working together in peace.

That is why the Ministry of Religion in Indonesia is conducting courses for teachers in Islamic boarding schools on the subject of religious and cultural diversity. The objective is to teach how to foster an open-minded view of pluralism in the country. We want to stress the consciousness that diversity should be embraced and celebrated.

Indonesia's dialogue on the issue is also reflected in our regional and interregional engagements, such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). We are also promoting it on a bilateral basis with countries of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, the Government supports the efforts of non-governmental actors working in various areas to promote interreligious harmony. In recent times, we have had the International Conference of Islamic Scholars, which was sponsored by Nandlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, and the World Peace Forum, which was hosted by Muhammadiyah, the second largest Muslim organization in the country.

We also see mass media as a partner in that endeavour because it is the daily intermediary between people and ideas. I am glad to say that the mass media in Indonesia is mindful of the need to promote interreligious and intercultural harmony. As a matter of strategy, we are happy to involve the media in our efforts to promote dialogue.

We recognize that no matter what is done, society will always have some elements of conflict and tension. That is normal: it is the nature of all human society. Rather than be discouraged, we must continue to work hard to encourage, inspire and promote harmony. The situation calls not for cynicism, but for greater investment of imagination and effort.

As for the way forward, we believe that more efforts should be made at the national level to promote conscious actions to create harmony among communities and to undertake appropriate education forums.

Non-governmental organizations and the media should play an important role in bringing people of different backgrounds closer together. At the international level, we hope the United Nations will institutionalize interfaith and intercultural initiatives and strengthen the role of the relevant agencies on the issue. We also stress the importance of resolving major international disputes, especially where they involve friction between religions and faiths.

It is our fervent hope that this dialogue will not only complement but also strengthen other initiatives that build bridges of understanding and goodwill essentially forming a universal web of conversation and cooperation among people of different beliefs and cultural backgrounds in the common interest of all humankind.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Nebojša Kaludjerović, chairman of the delegation of Montenegro.

Mr. Kaludjerović (Montenegro): I would like first of all to express my appreciation to the President for the convening of this important meeting. I would also like to thank the Philippines and Pakistan for their commendable initiative in creating this dialogue. We find that the preservation and enhancement of the interreligious and intercultural legacy present a practical contribution to the need to abbreviate the road from an idea to its implementation.

Today's High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is in this regard a very well-focused forum. As we are all well aware, ideas alone are often insufficient. We are fully confident that the United Nations is an excellent framework for the best practical and creative development of intercultural and interfaith cooperation among various nations. The United Nations possesses the confidence of its Member States to be the right forum for addressing differences of various traditions in spiritual and religious matters. That is best shown in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has remained an inspiration for all of us for the past six decades.

Cultural and interreligious interactions strengthen relationships between the United Nations and civil society. That kind of strong involvement is essential to the topics we are discussing today.

Montenegrin culture belongs to the millennia-old circles of the Mediterranean, the cradle of civilization. Its place in this tremendously dynamic and vibrant part of the world has never been a petrified or a dull one. We have witnessed constant streams of events and changes which have added to the image of the society that we all share today in Montenegro. I quote Fernand Braudel:

> "Our sea was from the very dawn of its protohistory a witness to those imbalances productive of exchange which would set the rhythm of its entire life."

I believe that that most excellently depicts the actual Mediterranean fabric into which my nation has been woven.

Montenegro is a country possessing genuine multi-ethnic and multiconfessional understanding. That is one of our most prominent values, which we have cherished and striven to safeguard and promote. I should recall that during the turbulent last decade of the twentieth century, Montenegro remained a safe haven of multi-ethnic and multireligious tolerance and accord in a region where abuses and atrocities were very often committed in the name of religion. The coexistence and mutual respect of Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam helped us to save lives, peace and our land.

As the Montenegrin President stated at the Regional Summit of Heads of State of South-East Europe, held in Bucharest in June under the auspices of UNESCO, "Harmony of religious and ethnic relations is the greatest treasure of Montenegro". We are therefore bound to preserve and enhance this legacy, working together not only in Montenegro, but with our neighbours in the Balkan region — which, at this very moment, must show its readiness for the European perspective that is so obvious. In that regard we welcome and support the Euro-Mediterranean Barcelona process and the proposed 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue as an expression of European mobilization to continue with the dialogue among cultures.

Let me also emphasize the importance of the Alliance of Civilizations, which in our view presents an exceptional framework for developing national and international strategies and action plans. By becoming a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Montenegro, a small Mediterranean and European country which for a millennium has engaged in intercultural and interfaith discourse, can contribute to the development of this process. Intercultural and interreligious understanding lays the basis for cooperation in many other areas such as the economy, industry, tourism and political and public life.

We are of the view that the main messages stemming from this forum should lead to finding concrete modalities for putting the ideas of the Dialogue into practice. In doing so we have, among other things, to bring these messages to the younger generations, as suggested in the conclusions of the Alliance of Civilizations, since young people are important and active promoters of dialogue. In this context, education represents a very significant part of the process of enabling young people to engage in intercultural and interreligious exchange; I cannot stress enough the importance that my country attaches to that.

Montenegro is ready to be the host and promoter of relevant programmes and activities which should lead to an increased understanding of the variety of cultures and religions. Only by reaching out to accept diversity can we become a real partner of the modern world.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad, chairman of the delegation of Kuwait.

Mr. Al-Murad (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like at the outset to thank the President for convening this High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I am totally convinced that the dialogue among societies and nations contributes to a culture of peace.

I was pleased yesterday to chair panel discussion 2, on best practices and strategies on interreligious and intercultural cooperation going forward. The discussion was positive and useful, and we believe that it will help lead to mutual understanding, trust and agreement with a view to attaining lasting peace.

During the last 10 days of the holy month of Ramadan, I would like to extend my greetings and best wishes to all Muslims and to believers of other religions.

For several years now, cultural and religious differences and conflicts have raged and, if left unchecked, could pose a threat to international peace and security and a direct threat to human civilization. This could also lead to destruction and to planting fear and terror in human hearts. Religious conflicts bear the seeds of destruction; if we turn the pages of history, we can see that religious differences have often been a source of conflict and war.

All religions promote similar spiritual and moral principles and ideals, common values that promote cooperation and peace. Islam, for example, recognizes the multiplicity and diversity of ethnic groups, races and genders. God says in the Koran,

> "O mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous among you."
> (*XLIX:13*)

We believe that other religions are based on those same principles and values. We should therefore work together to transform the world's culture from one of war to one of peace through dialogue and understanding, not through threats and killing. This dialogue should take place, not only at the international level, but also at the national level, and not only in theory, but also in practice.

We should recognize that dialogue between peoples and religions will contribute to understanding, friendship and good relations and has a major role to play in strengthening international peace and security. We believe that dialogue and cooperation between religions has today become an integral part of the political scene. We should recognize that to accept religious and cultural diversity and to strive for a culture of peace, openness and respect for the religions, traditions and cultures of others, we must establish internal mechanisms and provide the necessary resources to fight violence and intolerance against other ethnicities, religions and races, while respecting the belief systems and creeds of others. Strengthening an approach of moderation between religions will ensure the realization of a great measure of understanding. The Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs of Kuwait has adopted and is strengthening such a moderate approach, in accordance with Government directives and guidelines. Kuwait has held several international conferences on the subject of moderation in Islam, including one held in November of last year in Washington, D.C., attended by 100 Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The conference discussed the dangers of extremism and the importance of strengthening moderation in all religions and promoting religious tolerance.

I am pleased to mention that yesterday, 4 October, the Foreign Affairs Council of the Gulf sent a peace and friendship message to all States. It stresses the urgent need to engage in religious tolerance and to combat extremism. That message conveys our work in spreading religious tolerance, which is the key to peace and understanding around the world. We stress the acceptance of others on the basis of mutual respect for and understanding of others.

Discrimination and doubts that confront Muslims are a problem everywhere and are a major concern to us, because it distorts the image of Islam and undermines relations with other faiths and creeds. Recent reports have documented an increase in incidents prompted by fear of Islam and of foreigners and in hate crimes against Muslims. The negative political discourse in the media against Islam and Muslims in the West complicates things even further. Linking terrorism to Islam is unacceptable because it exacerbates xenophobia in the West against Muslims and Islam. Millions of Muslims living in the West who were already deprived of opportunities in their own countries of origin have become targets for discrimination and hatred and are increasingly marginalized.

Allow me to recall here that there are no legal restrictions on freedom of expression, but freedom of expression must be exercised responsibly and wisely, without affecting the sensitivities of others, especially in the multicultural societies of today. It is a question of wisdom and responsibility; it is not a legal issue. Any expression that affects others in the name of freedom is considered irresponsible and provocative and could generate negative emotions and reactions.

If the leaders of religious societies truly and effectively participate in deepening the understanding of other religions, civilizations and cultural organizations, it should be possible to find among those religions the common noble values that would allow them to lead their societies towards peace, tolerance and mutual understanding. Religions are the solution and not part of the problem; religious leaders need to prove that.

The Islamic Cultural Centre of New York, which it is my honour to preside over, is the largest Islamic association in New York. It works and strives to cooperate with others in good will. It would like to make itself known to others; that is why it has organized a series of dialogues and symposia on religions, such as the tri-partite dialogue held last November, bringing together Jews, Christians and Muslims. It commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr., Day last year. We also participated in the Imams and Rabbis conference on peace in Spain in March of 2005. The Islamic Council also sponsored the tripartite

dialogue with the main New York church and synagogue. The Council has also promoted and contributed considerably to financing that meeting in its continuous efforts to build bridges of friendship between people and to deepen the roots of love and tolerance among all.

In conclusion, allow me to reaffirm my country's commitment to the strengthening of dialogue between all religions and cultures so that peace and tolerance can prevail.

The meeting rose at 1.30 p.m.